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OR,

The Nabobs of Centipede.

A Romance of Arizona Mines and
Arizona Vengeance.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN COLDGRIP" NOVELS,
"HERCULES GOLDSBUR," "SUNSHINE
SAM," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

IN CENTIPEDE CITY, ARIZONA.

"He isn't here yet, but it is early. We will wait."

"Does he come every night?"

"No, but he hasn't been here for some time, and I happen to know that he is in the neighborhood."

The two men exchanging those words had entered the most notorious den in Southern Arizona, and despite the earliness of the hour, a little past sundown, the various games were already in full blast.

"HE'S DOING JUST WHAT I WANT HIM TO DO," THOUGHT THE YELLOW SHADOWER.
"HE IS LOOKING AT THE MARKED FINGER, AND IT PUZZLES HIM, TOO."

More than fifty players occupied the tables scattered around the somewhat cramped room, and all were so busy that not one raised his head to look at the new-comers. Jose's den always did a good business, and nothing was allowed to interrupt the proceedings when the games were running.

The two walked over to one corner and took a seat at a vacated table. They did not call for a pack of cards, but viewed the animated scene around them, the younger of the couple manifesting more interest in it than his companion. Both were Americans, though the face of one was quite dark, the effects, probably, of a long residence under the sun of the Arizona desert.

The other was much younger—in fact, he did not appear to have passed his twenty-second year. He had a handsome figure, as well as a prepossessing face. His eyes were black and full, and a neat mustache adorned his lip.

"What about Don Ramon?" he asked, leaning across the table. "You were telling me something while we came down, but stopped rather abruptly."

"Did I?" smiled the elder, a man of thirty and six, with the physique of a Titan, and the strength of one. "He is the big nabob here. It is Don Ramon this and Don Ramon that. Two-thirds of the population of Centipede City are his slaves."

"He is rich, then?"

"Rich? Nobody knows what the man is worth."

"Where did he get it?"

"The earth yielded a million or two."

The young man seemed to fall back in his chair.

"Is he so rich as that?"

"Not the least doubt of it. Don Ramon is the richest man of this country—I mean the Southwest, of course. The inner life of the nabob no one knows. That and his past is a sealed book to us here. You have seen him. Now, how did he strike you?"

The listener smiled and stroked his mustache.

"Not very favorably," was the reply. "I don't like his eye."

"What's the matter with it?"

"I must confess I can hardly tell you, but I don't like it. Does the girl—his daughter—Juanita, look like him?"

"You shall see before long. I prefer to let you find out for yourself."

"That might be pleasant if she were willing. The man isn't American?"

"Not a bit of it. If he was, by heavens! I wouldn't want to be one!"

"Don't be too hard on the fellow," laughed the young man.

The big companion did not at once reply; he had glanced toward the open door and his gaze became fixed.

"There's our man, Dick: there's our red Hermann," he said in low tones.

The young man turned immediately and saw in the doorway the lithe figure of an Indian, so dressed that his admirable form was strikingly displayed.

The red-skin had just come in and was looking over the inmates of the den with an amused smile.

"He's worth looking at," declared the youth, still gazing at the Maricopa.

"Yes, and worth seeing perform."

Having taken in the various groups of players to his satisfaction, the Indian walked up to the counter, nodded to the genius who presided over it and quietly took a drink.

Then he went to one of the tables and looked at the game in full blast there.

He was naked from the waist up. From his belt downward he wore close-fitting leggings which terminated at the tops of a pair of moccasins soft enough to let him walk with the noiselessness of the panther. At one side of his body hung a small leather bag, and opposite it a knife in a dark sheath. He had no other weapon.

The only ornament visible about the Indian was a long feather, which he had thrust through his wealth of black hair that hung down to his shoulders and almost covered them despite their breadth. It was an eagle feather, and looked so new that the youth who was studying the Maricopa thought that it had just been plucked from the wing of the noble bird.

The red-skin had barely taken his place at the gaming table when a character entirely different entered the den.

"There's the ferret of Centipede," exclaimed Manuel, the elder of the two Americans, and the younger transferred his gaze to the new-comer; "that is Jaguar Juan, Spanish blooded, cat-natured, and cool—in short, a terrible man on a trail. I know that he's here for a purpose, and that's all. He looks to me like a man biding his time. He knows that something will 'turn up' if he waits, and that is what he is doing. Now, we're going to have an exhibition. The boys are tired of handling the paste-boards—they do it every night, you know—and Mosco will furnish the diversion."

The next moment there was a call for Mosco from all over the house, and the eyes of the Indian seemed to get a new light.

He stepped back from the table and thrust one hand into the pouch at his belt.

"The throwing trick first," whispered the young American's companion. "I never see it but I wonder how many hearts he has spitted in the same way."

By this time the Indian had taken from the pouch a bright new fifty-cent coin which he was cutting around the edges with his knife. When he had finished he walked across the room and fastened the coin to the wall by the rough ridges he had made.

A moment later he stood at the further end of the den, fully thirty feet from the silver piece, and was holding the knife by the tip of its seven-inch blade. Everybody was looking at the pose of the Maricopa, and all at once he launched the knife and struck the coin in the center, the point of the blade passing through and adhering to the wood.

A burst of rough applause followed this act, Dick Dirrell, the American, clapping hands loudly, and securing from the Indian a thankful glance.

"That trick is nothing. Wait," said the young man's companion.

"Who will hold the money?" asked the Maricopa in a loud voice.

"I will, Mosco, if it's any accommodation," was the response, and Jaguar Juan, the detective of Centipede, stepped forward and took the pierced piece from the Indian's hand.

Holding the half-dollar in the full light of the nearest lamp, firmly between finger and thumb, the Yellow Shadower stood as straight as an arrow and looked at the red-skin toying carelessly with the dagger.

Suddenly the knife was sent spinning through the air, and the coin, struck by the point of the deadly blade, was dashed against the wall.

"Wonderful!" cried young Dirrell.

"That's nothing; better is to come!" smiled his friend.

Dirrell looked incredulous.

"We'd like to see 'the mouth trick,'" cried a voice from one corner of the den.

"It's too dangerous," protested some one.

"The red-skin took a drink when he came in."

"Mosco's nerve is steady if he did," retorted the Indian, turning toward the speaker, and striking his own arm at the same time. "His muscles are steel wire! Who will hold the piece of white money between his teeth?"

A moment's silence pervaded the room. Those who had seen the trick knew it was very dangerous. It consisted in a person holding the half-dollar between his teeth, allowing but half of it to protrude beyond the mouth. At this scanty target the Indian would cast the dagger, and knock the coin from its place. There was a rumor that in another place this same red juggler had killed a man at this trick, but this did not prevent him from finding assistants wherever he went.

"I'll go you once more," assented Juan, taking the money and placing it between his teeth. "You sha'n't boast of a steadier nerve than I think I've got. Now, here we are!"

Mosco seemed to shrink from the task before him. It was evident he wished some other person had presented himself for the ordeal, and for a moment he appeared on the eve of giving up the throw.

The long, muscular fingers of the Maricopa toyed with the shining blade, and his eyes sought Jaguar Juan in what looked very like a mute appeal for his withdrawal.

"By heavens! I believe the fellow is unnerved for once," said Manuel, Dirrell's friend.

"He's going to back out and take the laugh."

"No, he's not! See!"

Mosco had stepped back another pace, and his fingers had slid down to the point of the blade. He threw back his hand, looked at Juan as if to make sure of his nerve, and then launched the terrible knife.

Every eye followed that flying blade. The breathless spectators saw it shoot straight toward the Yellow Shadower until within a few inches of his head, when it turned and went on, hilt first! Those who had witnessed the knife trick had never seen the dagger do this before. It seemed to turn of its own accord, and when it struck the coin from Juan's mouth, almost knocking him down at the same time, cries of disapproval went toward the dirty rafters.

As for Mosco he was all in a quiver; every nerve seemed unstrung, and, heedless of the derisive laughs that were rising on every hand, he went to the bar and seized the long-necked bottle from which he was wont to refresh himself at the close of his performances.

Meanwhile Juan had recovered and was looking at the Indian with a quizzical smile. His mouth felt as if several teeth had been loosened, but that was better than having the dagger in his cheek.

"What made the knife turn?" asked Dirrell.

"The Indian did it on purpose. He was afraid he hadn't nerve enough for the trick with the point."

"Are they friends?"

Dirrell was looking at Juan.

"I'll answer that question elsewhere if you'll let me. I said that Juan was waiting for something to turn up. The ferret of Centipede is 'biding his time,' and, between you and I, that

Indian wouldn't kill him for all the gold in Arizona."

"But he could have missed Juan!"

"I think he tried to do so, but his nerve failed him for once. If my friend, Don Ramon, had held the coin the red-skin's muscles would have been equal to the demand."

Dick Dirrell was about to ask why, when there sprung into the room a young Greaser whose face was almost white.

"Felipe!" exclaimed the big American. "Don Ramon's servant."

The Mexican reached the middle of the den as if by a single bound and there he cried out that his master was dead.

Men sprung to their feet everywhere, overturning a hundred chairs.

"Dead? Don Ramon dead?" they cried.

"Dead—Murdered!" was the response, and the next moment Felipe was in the middle of the most excited crowd Centipede City had ever known.

In the midst of it all Dirrell's wrist was grasped and a voice from across the table said:

"Look at Jaguar Juan. He's been waiting for something, but not exactly for this."

CHAPTER II.

THE NEW MISSION.

DIRELL looked in the direction indicated by Manuel and his gaze became fixed.

The terrible news brought by Felipe had astonished the detective of Centipede City like the drop of a thunderbolt from a clear sky. He had not recovered, for he was staring at the Mexican servant and listening like a man in a maze to the answers he was making to the questions showered upon him.

Don Ramon, the millionaire of the Territory, dead! That very afternoon he had inspected his new mines and given directions about another shaft. He had promised his men a holiday and told them that he had resolved to hunt down Captain Dagger, the pest of the roads, and the man who had robbed his bullion train on its way to the capital.

But now he was dead—murdered!—killed, perhaps, by some secret foe; and in his own house, Felipe said. It seemed impossible.

Near Jaguar Juan stood the Indian, Mosco. He had put up his wonderful knife and was taking in every word of the servant's story. Nothing indicated that he was more interested than usual. He seemed to listen because the rest did; but now and then he stole a glance at Juan and looked at Felipe again.

As a matter of course the servant's story was followed by a rush to Don Ramon's house. It was a palace good enough for a prince. He had not stinted himself while building it; his gold had flowed like water, and the result was that, at the foot of the Santa Rita Mountains, there had risen a mansion the like of which did not exist west of the Rockies.

Juan seemed drawn to this palace by a curiosity which he could not curb. He went with the crowd, with Mosco at his heels, and passed into the house with the foremost and saw the figure of Juanita, Don Ramon's daughter, in the sumptuous hall.

The young girl—she was not past nineteen, with a figure which was grace itself—was as white as the collar at her throat. It was easily seen that she was trying to master her agitation, that the situation was telling upon her nerves; and, though she greeted the rough-looking men as a woman would, under the circumstances, she was looking for somebody who did not seem to be in the crowd.

Juanita led the way to the library where the dead man sat in his chair. The body had not been disturbed; but occupied the same position, as when Felipe, taking his master his evening drink, found him there with the marks of something—fingers, perhaps—on his dark throat.

Don Ramon looked darker than usual as one does who has been strangled, and the man, dazed by the sight for a moment, fell back in horrified silence.

The clock on the wall over the chair pointed to the hour of nine, though it was evident that Don Ramon had been dead for some time when discovered. There was no disarrangement of the furniture; the dead man's clothing was in order; nothing indicated a struggle for life between men.

Juanita fell back and looked at the crowd, but said nothing, as if she wanted it to form an opinion without questioning her.

Don Ramon was a man of splendid physique. It seemed impossible that any one could strangle him with ease, and yet he had been killed without the sign of resistance.

Out of respect for the girl, who stood like a statue at one side of the room, the crowd at last fell back, and Jaguar Juan, moving toward the door, felt his sleeve touched by a hand.

"I want you to stay," said Juanita, as their eyes met.

He slipped into the hall and thence into the rear room, where he waited for the girl.

This detention seemed to be the very thing the Arizona detective desired. A smile flitted over his face while he waited and when he heard the

last miner and gambler depart his eyes lit up with expectation.

A moment later a footstep approached the door and it opened to reveal the graceful form of Don Ramon's heiress. Juanita closed the door and advanced, looking straight at him, with an expression of mingled joy and triumph.

"I was fearful that you had not come back," she said. "You went away last night?"

"Yes, but I came home an hour ago."

"Over the San Bernardino trail?"

"Yes."

"And saw no one?"

Jaguar Juan thought a moment.

"I saw a horseman," he answered.

"Masked?"

"I wasn't near enough to see that much."

Juanita did not proceed.

"What do you think about Don Ramon's death?" asked the detective.

"Oh, I don't know! It is terrible, and so sudden!"

She put her hands to her forehead and held them there a second.

"I want you to help me," she said, when she went on. "That is why I detained you. I want to put this mystery into your hands. The hand that took the life must be found, and by you, Juan. I know what some of the men think, for I heard them whispering to one another as they went out. They say—some of them do—that this is Captain Dagger's work. You are a man of secrets—your calling makes you one—"

"My calling?" interrupted Juan.

"Yes, I know what you are. You are a shadow—that is, you hunt people down who commit crimes. Never mind that. This may be Captain Dagger's work and it may not. You must find out the truth. You must swear the most sacred oath of your life to do so. Are you willing?"

She had come so close that he could look into the clear depths of her eyes and see determination there.

"You must swear by the cross, which is the holiest thing I know," she went on. "I have it here, look." And she held in front of the man her own private crucifix.

Then she placed it, forced it, into his hand and at once proceeded to administer an oath of the most terrible import.

There was no escape, but, it seemed that the detective would not have avoided the oath if he could have done so.

"You belong to me now!" cried Juanita when the oath had been taken; "you are mine, body and soul. You shall find who killed the Don. Fail or desert the trail, and may the death of the recreant be yours! I know that you have been biding your time for something. I know that you have watched Don Ramon like a hawk, these many months. Why, I ask not. I want to know who killed him and why the blow fell. It will be a trail of mystery and of death. It has begun with a murder and may end with a crime just as black. You are nothing but a human bloodhound, and you have been upon his trail for some purpose all these months. He is dead now. Go and avenge him—find the man who cheated you out of a great victory!"

Juan look at the beautiful speaker like one in a maze. Who had told her all this? How had she penetrated to his secret? Yes, he had tracked Don Ramon, the nabob; he had watched him many months, biding his time; but now, the man was dead and his murderer was at large. The tracker of Arizona had been cheated out of his triumph.

"We've said enough here," continued Juanita. "We are alone with him, and you can have your own way. Go to him and begin."

Her hand was upon the detective's arm, and she pushed him toward the room where sat the rigid dead.

"Don't come back here. I know nothing. It is your duty to find out everything. Go from the chair of the dead to the trail—to victory or death."

Juan soon was alone with the dead.

"I didn't want it this way," said he, "but I have to accept the situation, and, by the eternal! I am going to keep my oath! I have as much at stake as she has. I was closing in on this man when some one came between and took him out of the way. One trail ends and another begins."

The room was lighted by a couple of waxen tapers which Juanita's hands had placed on the table, and their light threw a weird gleam over the features of the now disrowned gold-king. The detective approached the dead and bent over the chair. He picked up one of Don Ramon's hands, and looked at it for a moment.

"Ho!" he cried. "When did he lose this?" And his eyes became fixed on the little finger of the left hand, which was minus the first joint!

This loss, small as it was, seemed to puzzle the shadower, and he held the hand a long time in the candlelight. At last he put the member down and bared the dark throat. What a handsome, well-shaped throat it was! He had often looked at it while its owner was in the full vigor of manhood, but his hands had never touched it before.

But somehow or other he could not keep away

from the hand which had the missing finger-joint. He picked it up again and looked at it long and narrowly.

"I shall have a question for Mosco," he murmured to himself. "He may have a better memory."

All at once the detective went to the west window. It was a warm night, and the window was up, though the heavy curtains were drawn. Juan did not part these at once, but drew near and stood like a statue alongside.

Presently one of the curtains was drawn aside, and Juan saw a dark, red face and a pair of eager eyes. In an instant he had stooped, and the faces of the pards were near together.

"What is it, Mosco?" asked the detective.

The Indian did not speak, but pulled the curtain still further aside, leaped nimble-footed into the room, and at once glided to the dead man, whose left hand he jerked up and looked at most searchingly.

"He's doing just what I want him to do," thought the Yellow Shadower, looking at the marked finger, and it puzzles him, too.

The Maricopa did not lift his head until the detective had nearly lost all patience.

"Look, Captain Juan!" he cried. "When did Don Ramon lose a part of his finger?"

"Don't you know, Mosco?"

The Indian shook his head.

"Neither do I, then," answered the shadower.

"It's all mystery to me, but we have to make everything plain. I'm oath-bound, Mosco."

"To the girl Juanita?" asked the Indian with a smile.

"To Juanita."

"Why does she want to know who killed the man who lost a finger-joint?"

"He is Don Ramon—and she called him 'father'."

The red-skin fell back, and, folding his arms, looked speechless at Jaguar Juan.

"What's got into you?" demanded the detective, going over to him. "I've been on this man's trail these ten months. I was closing in on him when somebody came between and killed him. Don't you think I want to know who did the deed, and why? What do I care particularly for the girl? She is young and will have several millions at her command—enough to buy her the handsomest husband on the globe. I want revenge. The assassin sha'n't baffle Jaguar Juan, the Arizona bloodhound. You can help me or no, just as you please. I shall go to the end of this tangle."

"It will be a dark trail, master," reminded the Indian.

"I don't care if the way to the end be paved with death."

The Indian gave him a long look and touched his arm.

"Mosco is with you; he never deserts Juan, the trailer; but, both of us will not see the end?"

"Why not?"

"Because the hand and brain that did that work is capable of doing more like it. One of us is doomed!"

CHAPTER III.

A LEAF FROM A LIFE.

YOUNG Dick Dirrell and his big friend Manuel were among those who went from Jose's den to have a look at the dead man in the nabob's palace. When they had satisfied their curiosity they withdrew and Manuel guided his companion to his own house, which was near by.

"I'd like to know what Jaguar Juan thinks of it," said Manuel. "I guess it's the unexpected to him. He wasn't looking for anything like this, as I could see by the way he took the news. He's been watching Don Ramon like a hawk these ten months."

"Did Don Ramon know it?"

"I should think he did!"

"What's the trouble?"

Dirrell's question was couched in anxious tones.

"I presume that is one of the detective's secrets, and one which he wouldn't like to part with," smiled Manuel. "You'll remember that I said at Jose's that Don Ramon's life was a sealed book to us?"

"You said so."

Manuel looked toward the open window, and then took some cigars from a drawer. He was the owner of a small but very profitable mine, and, some weeks previous to the opening of our story, had sent for Dirrell to come to Centipede and become his partner. Dirrell was ready for anything at the time, and within an hour after receiving the message was on the road. He had been but two days in the mining city—not long enough to know much about it, though he had heard something of Don Ramon and his wealth.

"Now, Dick," resumed Manuel, breaking the end off his cigar, "I am going to tell you something about a life and let you draw your own conclusions. I shall make some statements not wholly unknown to you, for you have seen a good deal of the world, and have heard some of the wild legends of the Southwest."

About twenty years ago there appeared on the Mexican border two desperadoes who soon became the most noted characters of that region. Everything went to show that they were broth-

ers, and twin brothers at that. They were handsome young men, dressed in half brigand style, and plundered the rich ranches without mercy.

"Yellow Pedro, so-called, was the handsomer of the two. He had the figure of an athlete, and the face of an Adonis. Perfectly fearless, he laughed at the proclamations put out against him and his brother, and used to tear them down in broad daylight and in the presence of a hundred people, all of whom were armed to the teeth. Such exploits as theirs kept the border in an uproar all the time, and it got to be so that when the Dons came to make out their expense account for the year, they always allowed so much for the brothers, as they expected to be robbed before the year was out, and rarely were they disappointed."

"One morning a young rancher—a mere boy—crossing the Great Waste, saw a lot of vultures circling over an object which looked like a staggering horse. Quickening the speed of his own animal, he rode forward and yelled the birds away. Then to his horror he discovered a man lashed to the horse, with his face upturned to the sky, and in the last throes of death. The face had been picked out of all semblance to humanity by the voracious birds who could not wait for death, but the mangled lips could speak, and they told the boy the most terrible story of fiendish cruelties ever heard on those plains. The victim was Don Morello, the richest ranch-owner in the land, and a man who had offered a large reward for the heads of the bandit brothers. He told the boy that he had been seized near his own house the day before, tied to the horse and turned loose at the mercy of sun and vultures. The agonies he had suffered could not be told in detail by the eaten lips, for death was near at hand when the boy found him, and he hastened to leave a message to his child, then a babe in the cradle."

"Don Morello had lost his wife a few days before the terrible act of the bandits, and the little one was the sole heiress of his wealth. The boy went back over the waste, leading after him the black horse and his ghastly burden, but when he reached the ranch Don Morello was dead, having died with the name of his child on his lips and a never finished call for vengeance in his heart."

"Of course this awful crime threw the whole district into a state of rage and terror. The rich Dons banded together and hunted high and low for the two brothers. They offered a fabulous sum for their heads and soon had the best hunters after the reward. But all their efforts were in vain. For a time Yellow Pedro and his brother continued to loot the country at their pleasure, and all at once disappeared, as if the hunters had found and dealt with them."

"Were they never heard from?" asked Dirrell, who had not lost a single syllable of Manuel's narrative.

"I'm coming to that," was the reply. "You would hardly expect such dare-devils to go out of existence without ever turning up again in some manner. Just six months after Don Morello's death the little child he had left behind vanished like a puff of smoke. She was stolen from the arms of her nurse, who said that a handsome man, whose figure recalled the descriptions of the bandit brothers, came like a thief and took her away, leaving the prints of his fingers on her throat. There was no doubt that one of the villains had come back and completed the wreck of Don Morello's family by stealing the babe and heir. The hunt began anew, but without results. The child was never recovered, and in course of time the ranch buildings were destroyed by fire, and the fine grazing lands fell into ruin. Such was the destruction of Don Morello's home."

"Well, afterward the man called Don Ramon turned up. Twenty years had passed since the incidents I have related, and, while there was nothing to connect him with them, he had to kill two men who said that he looked like one of the brigand brothers who had made such a bloody mark in Northern Mexico. Do you want to know how he killed them? He simply disarmed them in spite of their agility, and held them at arm's length, choking them to death with one hand. Those who saw the feat say his strength was something terrible, the very thing Don Morello's nurse said. It was after the death of the two men that Don Ramon came to Centipede with lots of money and a secret about the mines. He knew just where to sink his shafts, and not one ever failed for him. I saw that fine palace of his go up and become something nice enough for Solomon of old in all his glory. Some time after his arrival Juanita, the daughter, arrived and in charge of Felipe, the man who brought to Jose's den awhile ago the news of the tragedy."

"When did Jaguar Juan come upon the scene, and what did he do?" queried Dirrell.

"I saw him the first time he struck Centipede," said Manuel. "It was in Jose's ranch. We were at the games one night when there came in at the open door the man who is now called Yellow Shadower of Centipede. He looked quietly round and saw Don Ramon playing at one of the tables. I was looking at him at the time—at Juan, I mean—and thought I saw him start slightly, and smile to himself, as if he had

made a discovery. Almost at the same time Don Ramon saw him, and then their eyes met. Juan said nothing, but walked away from the table which he was approaching at the time and took a drink at the bar. The next morning we knew we had a new citizen, for Juan bought a tenth interest in the 'Singed Cat,' and has been one of us ever since."

"Watching Don Ramon?"

"Like a hawk."

"With Don Ramon's knowledge, too?"

"Certainly. It has been tiger watch tiger all this time. There's a sharp claw beneath Juan's velvet. I have been deeply interested in the game these two men have played right under our noses. Juan was biding his time—why, we can only conjecture. He knew his man—we could see that. He knew that he had found the right fellow, but in all these months he never tried to cross Don Ramon's path."

"Why didn't Don Ramon kill him?"

"Why kill him when he made no move to break up his rule in Centipede? answered Manuel. "The dead man literally owned the men who have made him the richest nabob in the Southwest; he could have set a dozen assassins on the shadower's track at any time, but he did not. Felipe would have killed Jaguar Juan at a look from his master, but the look was never given, and now it is too late. You have seen Juanita, the beautiful heiress of Don Ramon's millions. Did you see her touch Jaguar Juan's sleeve as we were quitting the house?"

"No. Did she do this?"

"Yes. She burns with vengeance, that girl does, and ere this the Yellow Shadower has taken the trail."

"To avenge the death of the man who would have been his victim had he lived?"

"I don't know about that," answered Manuel.

"Juanita has enough to pay her bloodhound well for his work, and, then, I fancy he wants to know who robbed him of final victory. That is natural, eh, Dick?"

Young Dirrell bowed.

"Now, what do you think, with my story at an end?" questioned Manuel, knocking the ashes from the end of his cigar.

"I know what you expect me to say."

"Well?"

"I am expected to answer that I think Don Ramon one of the outlaw brothers of twenty years ago."

Manuel made no reply.

"You have told your story with that end in view," continued Dirrell. "After twenty years one of the bandits of the Mexican border has turned up to play another drama in real life, and to die finally at the hands of one of his victims. What ever became of the other brother? Couldn't you enlighten me just a little concerning him?"

Big Manuel burst into a laugh.

"By Jove, I'm no wizard!" cried he. "I've been here these three years attending strictly to my knitting. About all I know for certain is what we make out of the 'Pet Tiger Mine.' What became of the other brother, eh? I have not said that I know what became of either. I merely asked you for your opinion. You seem to have one—to the effect that Don Ramon was one of the twin bandits of the old frontier. Felipe ought to be a man of secrets, but he has the nature of a clam, and can play Sphinx to perfection. Then, there is Chita Con—"

"Who is he?" interrupted Dirrell.

"Don Ramon's right-hand man; came with him to Centipede; looks to all the mines, and knows to a dollar what the nabob was worth. You saw him to-night. He wears a red handkerchief round his neck; is never without it. He's the fellow who jumped up when Felipe said Don Ramon was dead, and had the Mexican by the shoulder and was shaking the story from him before he could get second breath; that was Chita Con."

Dirrell remembered the man distinctly.

"Let's go out and see how the town is taking the crime," continued Manuel. "There won't be anything doing at the mines for some time now. Then business will be resumed with Chita Con at the helm, and there will be a new nabob in Centipede."

Manuel and Dick passed from the house and found themselves in the narrow rambling street which ran past it. The night was a beautiful one; there were myriads of stars in the blue vault above and a cool breeze came down from the mountain passes.

Mechanically both men looked toward Don Ramon's house at the same time, as if their thoughts were the same. They could see a dim light in one of the rooms and while he wondered what it shone upon, Dirrell heard a low voice at his ear:

"A man is crouched to our right, behind the round boulder. He has just dropped below it."

Young Dirrell put his hand upon his hip, but Manuel's finger touched him restrainingly.

"I got a glimpse of him," Manuel went on, drawing Dick from the spot. "It is the cat-footed, lynx-eyed shadow of Don Ramon's household."

"Felipe?"

"Felipe! This thing is getting interesting. I'd

like to choke Felipe's secrets from him, but I won't try it to-night."

"Jaguar Juan will do that if he suspects," Dirrell intimated.

"If he suspects?" smiled Manuel. "Don't set the Yellow Detective down for a fool. He will more than suspect. He will know!"

CHAPTER IV.

FELIPE ON THE RACK.

THE man behind the stone was Felipe. He had been there some time with his keen black eyes riveted upon the open window of Manuel's house, and his sharp ears had probably caught something of the story which had been retailed to young Dirrell. The moment the door opened the eavesdropper dropped behind the boulder, and thought he had successfully eluded detection.

But, Manuel was quick, and, as we have seen, not only obtained a glimpse of the spy, but knew that he was Don Ramon's right bower.

Felipe was not disturbed, and with a grin of satisfaction he saw the two friends move down the street and vanish toward Jose's den!

A moment later he sprang up and vanished, not toward Don Ramon's house, but toward the main mine lately belonging to the nabob, and in a little while he had plunged into its mouth and was running down the dark corridor which seemed to lead one into the bowels of the earth.

Felipe continued his underground journey until he brought up before what felt like a solid wall. But his hands seemed to have eyes, for they found a ring in the stone, and in an instant he had pulled open a small door which he closed after going forward a few inches.

Felipe now struck a light, and as the little flame leaped up, the high walls of a cramped chamber were revealed. There was but one article of furniture in the place—a three-legged stool which stood near an iron safe apparently set in the solid wall.

A smile passed over Felipe's yellow face when he saw the safe, and setting his candle on the stool he fell before it and seized the knob.

It took him some little time to manipulate the combination successfully, and when he swung back the heavy door the smile on the sallow face disappeared.

"Heavens!" exclaimed Felipe, "he has been ahead of me!"

He picked up the candle and held it in the safe. The light penetrated to every corner of the small space before him, and one of his hands suddenly darted into a niche but did not find anything.

Felipe fell back and swore roundly.

It was evident that he had been sorely disappointed; he had come to the mine for—nothing!

Leaving the door wide open, he rose and stared at the big depository.

"I wonder if Chita Con knew?" he queried aloud. "If he did it was contrary to the agreement. Now we shall have fine work by the Yellow Shadower of Centipede. I saw Juanita take him aside, and then I listened. She made him swear on the cross to hunt down the man that took life to-night, and he will do it unless—"

Felipe turned with the sentence half-finished, and—fell back with a cry.

The door had opened—that was the noise he heard—and there stood in the doorway, with the light falling upon his stalwart figure and midnight beard, Chita Con, the overseer of the mines!

"Don't shut that door!" commanded the Hercules in stern tones, as Felipe moved toward the safe, with his hand outstretched to close the iron portal, and the following moment the big fellow placed himself between the servant and the safe.

"Sit down there!" continued Con, designating the stool. "You're the very man I want to see!"

"I?" stammered Felipe.

"Yes, you! Sit down!"

Looking at the overseer, whom he hated, as his scintillating eyes showed, he took the stool and shut his lips with an emphasis which seemed to say, "Open 'em if you can, Chita Con," and then watched the nabob's guardian with glistening eyes.

Chita Con folded his arms and seemed amused at Felipe's preparations to be stubborn.

"Did you find him dead?" asked the overseer.

There was no reply.

"I want words, not looks," warned Con, moving one step toward the Mexican. "I used to strangle cats when I was a boy, and my hands haven't lost the knack of it."

At the same time he thrust one of his hands toward Felipe in a careless way, but Felipe saw how big and silken it looked—the more dangerous for its silkiness.

"Did you find him dead?" resumed Chita Con, repeating his question, word for word.

"Yes," snapped Felipe.

The hand was making its mark.

"How long after the killing?"

The man on the rack grinned faintly.

"How should I know?" he exclaimed.

"You know a good many things, cat," was the answer. "You know who killed the man dead now in the house."

This accusation almost brought Felipe upon his feet.

"Sit still!" commanded Chita Con. "I was only stating a truth. You know who killed Don Ramon!"

There was neither movement nor answer on Felipe's part.

After looking at him for another second, the big overseer's hand fell upon Felipe's shoulder. "Don't you know?" he asked, looking into the very depths of the eyes upturned to his.

"I don't."

"You dare not swear you do not."

Felipe sprang erect and strode to the nearest wall.

Raising his right hand there he was about to make a cross on the gray stone when Con's closed on his wrist.

"By Heaven! I believe you would," said the overseer, pulling Felipe back and whirling him about so he could look into his face. "You needn't carry the game quite that far," and he pushed Felipe back to the stool and watched him a little while, like a man at his wits' end for an artifice.

"You came down here for a purpose!" he said at last.

"I often come here," replied Felipe.

"But if the death-blow had not been struck, you would have remained away?"

"Perhaps."

Chita Con glanced at the safe.

"Is anything missing?" he asked, coming back to the Mexican.

"How should I know?"

"You knew the combination," accused Con. "Whether he gave it to you or whether you stole it God only knows. Now, my cat, without more ado, I want the truth! You remain here longer than you want to stay if you refuse to answer my next question."

Felipe nerved himself for the trial, and looked defiantly into the dark eyes of the big overseer.

"Is the dead man really Don Ramon?"

Perhaps Felipe expected this question, perhaps he did not. At any rate, he tried to laugh, but the attempt was a failure, perhaps because there was something more than a mere threat in Chita Con's eyes.

"Is the dead man really Don Ramon?" he repeated.

"What do you mean, Captain Con?"

"I spoke English which you understand pretty well," said the overseer. "Now, what do you say?"

Felipe laughed again, this time with more success.

"Why don't you ask me if I am Felipe?" he cried.

"Men of your kind will deny their own identity if it serves their purpose. I don't care a continental who you are. I want to know if the dead man in the palace is really Don Ramon."

"You saw him."

"Never mind what I saw," snapped Con. "I want to know what you know."

"The dead man is Don Ramon," answered Felipe, with deliberation.

"You'd swear to that, too, I suppose?"

"By the cross."

Chita Con made no answer for a moment.

"When did he lose a finger-joint?" he asked, after a spell.

Despite his cool cunning, the Mexican started. "How should I know?" he cried.

"You were his secret keeper," smiled Con.

"Three days ago I played with Don Ramon, and saw his hands. They were not mutilated in any way then; they were perfect—as perfect as mine."

Felipe's eyes fell upon the hands Chita Con thrust into his face, and seemed to study them, mutely estimating their strength.

"A missing finger-joint, eh?" he murmured.

"Don Ramon's hand mutilated? Oh, I never made a study of his hands, Captain Con."

The overseer could not repress a laugh.

"You're a cute chicken, Felipe," said he.

"Your comb is full grown, and your spurs ditto. Do you think I believe that you have been Don Ramon's slave nearly all your life, and never noticed that he had a missing finger-joint? I would as lief believe that you would not observe a missing leg. Come, my yellow fox; it's getting late, and I have business elsewhere. What say you finally?"

"The dead is Don Ramon," answered Felipe, emphatically, rising.

"I reckon I must believe you. Not a word about this interview. You understand, Felipe?"

The Mexican bowed.

He went toward the safe, and was about to close the door which had remained open all this time when the hand of Chita Con arrested him.

"One moment before you do that," insisted the overseer. "Where is the will?"

Felipe fell back and looked up into the face of the overseer.

"The will, eh? Is there one?"

"Certainly," was the reply. "I want to see it. Don Ramon wrote it a year ago; he told me when the act was done. It must be here."

"Look for yourself," said Felipe, pointing toward the safe.

Chita Con rummaged through the safe,

watched by the Mexican, whose eyes had a gleam of pleasure, but he found nothing that rewarded his search.

"Now, shut it up," he ordered, turning to Felipe, who closed the door, locking it by the combination, and the two went out together. In the corridor there was not the least show of light, and once or twice the nabob's servant drew his knife and felt its edge from heft to point.

He knew that Chita Con was just ahead, his back toward him, and that his dagger would reach to his heart. All that was needed was a true blow, a quick stroke, preceded by a pantherish spring. Then the big overseer would never put him on the rack of torture again; then he would be free to play a game which, ever since the murder in the rich man's palace, had filled his mind, giving him no rest for thinking of it.

As often as Felipe raised his knife, that often he lowered it, and followed Chita Con like a dog. The boots of the two men made but little noise in the dark corridor, and Felipe, ready for bloodshed, but faint-hearted when the moment came, found himself putting off the time until he would lose the opportunity forever.

All at once he was startled by the crack and the flash of a lucifer. At the same moment he saw the figure of Chita Con turn in the leaping light, and he stood before the overseer self-convicted, with a naked knife in his hand.

"Just as I thought!" grinned the big guardian. "This is what one gets for letting a wolf follow him. You were going to kill me. What made you put it off so long?"

Felipe staggered against the wall, with a good deal of white in his sinister yellow face.

"Why should I kill you, Captain Con?" he stammered. "A mysterious assassin is abroad; he has killed Don Ramon. One ought to be on the lookout for him, as there's no telling who has been marked for the next victim."

"It's not you, cat!" laughed Con. "The hand that choked the life out of the Nabob of Centipede wouldn't kill you; don't fear that. Throw your knife away; there! Now, come along."

Cowed by the look and stern commands of the overseer, Felipe once more advanced toward the opening, but now he was ahead. He walked rapidly, being eager to reach the light of the stars, and at the mouth of the mine he was suddenly confronted by Con.

"I am master now," observed the big man. "I oversee the mines for Juanita. You are still in our employ. If I catch you at any suspicious work, I shall kill you like a dog. Don't cross my path, no matter what I do. I am ten tigers rolled into one. Now, go to your nest."

Thus dismissed, Felipe fell back and stared at Chita Con until that worthy turned and walked away.

"Ten tigers rolled into one, eh?" hissed Felipe, showing his teeth. "I'm more than that—I'm a dozen!"

He watched Chita until his figure was no longer visible, and then ran toward Don Ramon's palace with his hands clinched, and a laugh on his lips.

CHAPTER V.

A WOMAN IN THE CASE.

"DON'T set the Yellow Detective down for a fool."

Such was the advice given to Dick Dirrell by Manuel, as the reader may recollect.

Jaguar Juan was indeed, far from that, and when there was a mystery to be unraveled he was more than ever the alert, sagacious, persistent hound.

Oath-bound, he felt that he was not entirely his own master. He had entered the employ of Juanita, Don Ramon's child, had sworn to hunt down the hand which had taken the nabob's life, and might be expected to turn him over to the girl for punishment when found.

The circumstance of finding Felipe crouched by the stone near his house was not permitted to escape from Manuel's mind, and yet that night Jaguar Juan was surprised by a visit from the big American, Dirrell's friend. Manuel had a good opinion of Juan; they had played together at Jose's den, and Manuel wanted the murderer of Don Ramon brought to justice. Therefore, he resolved to acquaint Jaguar Juan with the incident of Felipe's eavesdropping, and did so without any reserve.

The detective of Centipede listened with a smile at his lips.

"Felipe is a sleek cat when you smooth the fur the right way," was his reply.

"You are going to hunt for the assassin?" asked Manuel.

"Yes, and what is more, Manuel, I shall find him, too."

Jaguar Juan spoke with much confidence, and when the interview had terminated he bade Manuel good-night and afterward went out himself and met Mosco the Indian at the edge of the town.

"Have you a rope with you?" he asked the red-skin, who nodded, and the next moment the two had separated, and the figure of the Indian juggler was moving down the path toward the mountain.

Jaguar Juan watched him out of sight, said something in an undertone, and then went toward Don Ramon's palace.

He entered by the door at the rear of the house and passed to the room still occupied by the dead. He was about to place his hand on the knob when the noise of a garment startled him, and he drew back among the shadows of the hall.

Hugging the wall, Jaguar Juan saw the figure of a female approaching with the tread of the cat. His first thought was Juanita, and he believed that he had surprised the girl in the act of stealing a visit to the corpse of her father.

"I won't disturb her," thought the Yellow Shadower. "She shall have her sorrow to herself."

The following second the figure came fully into view, and the detective would have fallen back if the wall had not prevented.

Instead of Juanita, an unknown woman stood before him.

She was older than the child of Don Ramon, but none the less beautiful. Blessed with a figure that was revealed by the close-fitting black gown she wore, she looked like a queen of tragedy coming upon the stage to perform some startling act in the drama. There was fire in her eyes, and her lips were pale and compressed.

Jaguar Juan found himself staring at this apparition of unknown beauty, and she passed him and entered the room of the dead before he had recovered.

"Flesh and blood, not ghost," cried the detective, as the door closed without noise upon the Unknown. "What brings that woman to this house, and from whence did she come? Have I found already the hand that slew Don Ramon?"

He went toward the door and touched the knob again.

It was near midnight and Centipede City was asleep, with the exception of Jose's customers who were discussing the crime of the hour. He knew that the Unknown was beyond the door—alone with the corpse of the nabob, and for some purpose.

This creature had precipitated herself suddenly upon the scene. She had come upon the stage with an abruptness which had taken his breath, and he had received the greatest surprise of his career.

Jaguar Juan stood at the door a long minute, listening for the presence of the strange visitor, but not a sound could he catch. All was still in the chamber of the dead.

At last he tried the door; it was not locked. Pushing it open, he ventured to look in, and what he saw was never forgotten.

The candles which Juanita had placed at the nabob's head before retiring threw their sickly light over a portion of the room. It fell upon the sheet-enveloped form of Don Ramon, and also revealed the woman—the female mystery—who had just crossed the threshold.

Jaguar Juan saw the woman, not the dead man. He noticed that she was standing erect over the body, holding toward heaven her right hand, like a person swearing by the Most High God, and unconsciously making a tableau striking in the extreme.

The astonished detective held his breath. He believed that a person in such an attitude was destined to say something important, and he awaited as he had probably never waited before in all his life.

"Hear me, Heaven!" suddenly cried the Unknown, not in loud tones, but in a voice, every intonation of which fell distinctly upon Jaguar Juan's ears. "I have found him after the hand of the strangler has done its work. I stand where he died without a struggle because he was enticed to his doom and his life cut off by the greatest fiend of the age. I swear to hunt down the hand that did this deed! I will follow it through thick and thin, through day and night. Nothing shall balk me. No man shall rob me of my victory. By all that is sacred I swear to bring to justice—to find and slay as I am bidden to slay—the man with the silken hand of death. Fate brought them together after long years of separation, and he died. I am his avenger, and no others shall be. I am the bloodhound that will hunt down the slayer of this man, and woe to the person who shall seek to deprive me of my prey. If I fail, visit upon me, Heaven, thy hottest vengeance. If I turn back, strike me dead without mercy!"

The uplifted hand came down, and the woman stepped back.

She quivered from head to foot with emotion, and Jaguar Juan saw that her face was whiter than the one under the sheet.

The shadower of the mountain city fell back to let her pass out. He felt that, having finished her oath, she would take her leave as noiselessly as she had come, and in this he was not mistaken, for in a moment he heard the rustle of a dress, and saw the Unknown enter the hall and pass down it toward the rear door of the house.

Jaguar Juan leaned against the wall and drew his boots. He dropped them to the floor and followed.

The strange avenger went out by the door and passed through the room beyond.

"He made this palace by theft and murder!"

she suddenly cried, stopping at the threshold and looking back upon the room she had just left. "He is the great criminal of his time. I ought to blot from existence the house he reared for himself and the creature up-stairs. Ah! I had forgotten her. Juanita, they call her. I'd like to to have her ear for a moment, but I'll get it some time. She may be sleeping now, and I won't disturb her. Sleep on, my girl. If you knew what I know you wouldn't be dreaming now, with the dead man in yonder room."

The last sentence ended with a laugh, and Jaguar Juan saw the woman slip from the apartment.

"In Heaven's name, who is she?" exclaimed the detective. "Until now I did not know that such a person existed."

The Unknown was gone, and the bound of Centipede had to follow if he would know how she had entered the city. He passed out into the night, saw the stars shining above the nabob's palace, and saw, too, the figure of the Unknown gliding toward the main mine.

It was almost too light to permit him to follow her without some fear of detection, but he could not afford to miss her now.

Keeping the shadows thrown by the shrubbery with which Don Ramon had planted a portion of his estate, Jaguar Juan kept at the heels of the midnight visitor. He saw her walk to the edge of Centipede City, saw her find tethered there a horse which seemed glad to see her, and watched her, with all his curiosity aroused, while she stood alongside the animal, with one of her white hands upon the saddle, and her face turned toward the houses.

"You are cursed from this night, Centipede!" she cried. "The life of that man seals your doom and the doom of all who indorse that crime. He has friends; he had slaves—men who toiled for him and overflowed his coffers with gold. Who succeeds him? The man called Chita Con—an outlaw with a price on his head. Who is his right-bower? The yellow cat named Felipe! I knew him when a kitten. I could have strangled him, and should have done it; but he always looked so weak, though now he is a full-grown cat with the sharpest kind of claws under his velvet. Well, maybe I'll strangle him after all." And the woman laughed again, and was in the saddle before Jaguar Juan heard the echo of her cackinnation.

Even while he looked the Unknown was off like a flash, and he was left to speculate as he had never speculated before. The whole thing was so mysterious, so singular that he could think of nothing else, and instead of going back to the Palace, which he had sought for a purpose, he went to his own shanty and entered so noiselessly that he did not rouse the cat which was his pet and the closest friend he had.

Half an hour later the detective stole from his house and went toward Jose's den.

The little one-eyed proprietor of the place was closing for the night for his last customers had disappeared. Juan walked into the den and seeing that it was empty, advanced to the bar, encountering a look of surprise from the single orb.

"Well, what do you know?" asked Jose, speaking of course of the murder, and then before the ferret could answer, he went on, leaning across the bar and giving Juan a whiff of his last drink: "I shouldn't be surprised if that's a woman in the case."

Jaguar Juan met Jose's observation with an amused smile.

"A woman, Jose? What makes you think so?"

"He was good-looking—as handsome as a picture."

"Yes."

"He's been everywhere in his time, so I've heard. That ar' some hot-headed women where he's been—some Spanish beauties what won't let a feller throw 'em off with impunity. You know that, cap'n, for you've been 'round some-what yourself."

Juan nodded; he was interested.

"Well, who's the female in this tragedy, Jose?" he asked.

Jose, with the dirtiest hand in Centipede, scratched his uncombed head.

"That's whar you've got Jose Santada," said he, with a comical grin. Then he looked all around before he continued.

"By the way, which o' them brothers fell in love with old Marne's gal?"

Jaguar Juan seemed to fall back from the counter. It was as if a new revelation had been made, and he saw that Jose would have given all he possessed in the world if he had not spoken.

"Which one, eh?" said the Yellow Shadow.

"Which one do you think, Jose?"

The one-eyed owner of the whisky ranch said nothing. He was staring at the door as if a ghost had presented itself there for his inspection: his eyes seemed ready to start from his head.

"Captain Juan, I'm sick—my old trouble," said Jose, suddenly pressing his hand upon his heart. "It comes oftener than it used to. I've got to shut up and go home. To-morrow we'll resume, mebbe, if I'm able. But—now—I—can't."

The ferret of Centipede saw that something, not sudden sickness, had interfered to still Jose's unruly tongue. What was it?

He let the little whisky-seller close his trap, but he followed him home. He saw another shadow on Jose's track; he saw that shadow enter the little cabin, and come out ten minutes later.

The next morning some one who wanted an early drink went to rouse Jose. He kicked the door in with a drinker's impatience, and beheld Jose lying on the floor with the single eye staring at the rafters.

Jose was dead.

CHAPTER VI. WAR TO THE KNIFE.

THE general opinion in Centipede City was that Jose's old trouble, heart disease, had caught him at last; he had fallen upon his hard floor and died there in the twinkling of an eye with no one with him to hear the last cry, or catch the final gasp.

Jaguar Juan went to the cabin to look at the corpse. He had not forgotten the scene at the ranch; he recalled how suddenly Jose ceased to talk about "the woman in the case," and how he had stared, as if a ghost had appeared there.

Nobody happened to be in the cabin but the dead man when the detective reached it. Jaguar Juan crossed the threshold and closed the door after him. Enough light came in by the window, and he saw the owner of the den lying on his back, looking at the rafters with that one black, but lusterless, eye.

Juan stooped over the body and looked close. The face looked a little darker than usual. There seemed to be an expression of pain about the lips.

The Yellow Shadower bent lower and looked sharper. His hands pulled down Jose's flannel collar, and he examined the throat.

"He died with the same kind of an attack that took Don Ramon off," murmured Juan. "This man was strangled!"

He looked awhile longer and then got up. In an instant he thought of the figure he had seen enter and quit the dead man's shanty.

"Somebody had to be silenced," continued the detective. "Jose's tongue was getting too glib. Heart disease? Let them think so. I'm willing."

He gave the corpse another glance and walked out, leaving the door so the sunlight might come in and kiss the bloated face of the little genius of the whisky den.

Meantime there was going on within the walls of Don Ramon's palace a scene which we must not overlook.

Despite the earliness of the hour Juanita, the heiress, had a caller.

He had tripped up the steps with the springiness of youth, and looked handsomer than he had looked for months.

It happened that the girl was near the door when the bell tinkled, and when she opened she found herself face to face with Chita Con, the giant overseer.

The big fellow bowed low but looked keenly at the beautiful girl through his long dark lashes, and when he was invited inside, stepped forward with alacrity.

It was no secret that Chita Con was an admirer of the nabob's daughter. All Centipede knew that he wanted some day to become more than a mere overseer of the mines—that he sought to be a partner, and that he intended to win Juanita as a preliminary move toward the objective point.

Did Juanita encourage him? Was she ready to mate with such a man? She was younger than Chita Con; but she must know something about his past life. Don Ramon who seemed to worship her had probably told her something concerning Chita Con, and Felipe—well, Felipe, if he had not seconded Don Ramon's narrative, knew enough against the overseer to make a fair creature like Juanita hate him. At least such was current rumor.

Chita Con said nothing about the crime which had thrown Centipede into a furor. He did not ask to see the corpse of the man he had served and to whom he was accountable for every ounce of gold taken from the ten mines which he owned. He had come on another mission.

Passing under Juanita's guidance into the parlor, where the light was not bright, owing to the heavy curtains which had not been drawn since the murder, he faced the girl with a look which she could not avoid.

"It becomes my duty to take charge of his papers," said Chita Con.

Juanita started.

"He is not buried yet," she replied. "Why must you look at them so soon?"

The big overseer advanced a step.

"There has been murder committed," he went on. "We must not forget this. Don Ramon was killed by some secret assassin. He must be avenged—"

"He shall be!" interrupted Juanita.

"An examination of his papers may give us a clue, and the sooner one is found the better."

She made no answer.

"If you will give me the keys of his private desk I will see what can be done," continued Con. "I offer my services to vengeance. I am

here to say that I will follow this murderer to the bitter end and see that the slayer of Don Ramon is brought to justice."

Juanita looked toward the corner of the room in which stood one of the three desks used by the late nabob, and Chita Con's eyes followed hers.

"Here, look for yourself," said she, taking a bunch of keys from her pocket and handing them to the overseer. "I believe he kept some papers in the safe in 'Mine Number 10.' Have you been there?"

"Yes," said Chita Con frankly, recalling his experience with Felipe. "The safe there affords no clue; the desks may."

She watched him unlock the desk, and then, saying that she would not disturb his search, withdrew and left him alone.

"I'll have it my own way," thought the overseer throwing back the unlocked lid. "One of the desks ought to reveal the missing document. I'll look well and see what has become of it. I must have it. The will of Don Ramon is worth its weight in diamonds to me just now."

In another moment he was diving into the contents of the desk, overhauling papers of all kinds with his silken hands. But he did not find what he looked for, for he suddenly closed the desk with an expression of disgust and left the parlor, entering Don Ramon's private room with the tread of a cat.

He was about to open another desk when his quick ears caught the sound of footsteps near by, and the next moment he was listening with all ears.

"Is it that yellow spy?" asked Chita Con, looking toward the door. "I'm afraid I'll have to choke him yet. He had his knife out in the mine and I let him off. He knows every room in this house, and if there are any secret passages, as they say there are, he knows them, too."

While he listened, Chita Con heard nothing, but the moment he resumed work he heard the same sound again.

"It's the yellow cat, sure enough!" growled he, rising and moving on tip-toe across the room, and then he halted at the door with his hand on the knob.

There was in Chita Con's eye the gleam of a devil's. His ear almost touched the jamb while he listened, and his face told that it would not be well for the person whom he might catch playing spy at that time.

At last he opened the door and looked into the dark hall. At first he saw nothing, but in a moment he saw something crouched in the corner a few steps away. He drew his revolver and walked toward it.

He was within five feet of the object when it suddenly rose and he stood face to face with Felipe.

"I thought so, cat!" exclaimed Con, showing his teeth, while the nabob's servant stared at him with a malicious countenance. "Come forward."

Felipe obeyed.

Chita Con reached out, and, taking him by the shoulder, pulled him into the room, where he flung him down upon a chair and falling back eyed him for a moment.

"You've been playing spy," said Con. "You're a miserable eavesdropper who ought to be choked like your master was."

Felipe grinned at this, but said nothing.

"If it wasn't for the fact that this house already holds one dead man, by heavens! it should hold another," continued the overseer, showing his hands which looked capable of carrying out the implied threat. "How long are you going to pester me?"

"Felipe, captain?" whined the yellow servant.

"Yes, you!" hissed Chita Con. "You're a born spy; you're an intermeddler. You are bound to keep it up until you are strangled by some one."

Felipe left his chair and looked at Chita Con.

"You'll never choke me, Captain Con," laughed he.

"I won't eh? Why not?"

"Because I won't let you."

Felipe backed toward the door and grinned all the way.

"Halt!" cried Con, irritated by the fellow's sudden coolness. "You don't quit this room without my permission."

"I go when I'm ready," was the answer.

"You are bigger than Felipe; you have stronger hands and more blood. You think you rule the roost now because the master is dead, and you are overseer of the ten bonanzas. You don't rule anything of the kind. You are nobody but Chita Con. Nothing has been left you by Don Ramon. You ought to go back to your tame vultures. You may be needed in the desert where you once cut a splash until they made it too infernal hot for you and your gang!"

Chita Con's face got red. He crimsoned to the roots of his hair, looked daggers at the little man standing before him, and then took a step forward, with his fingers wound madly around the butt of his six-shooter.

"I guess not, Captain Con," said Felipe, grinning at the weapon. "You wouldn't shoot a man just because he knows something about the vultures and their old master, would you? You

call me a spy. What are you? I'm a gentleman beside you with the past you've got. I'm a cat, am I? If I were to tell Juanita about you, what would I call you?"

The big handsome face before the little Mexican grew red again, and Con's look became a stare.

"You won't find the paper you're looking for," continued Felipe, glancing at the desk.

"Why not? Because it isn't there."

"Then you've stolen it!" accused Con, flushing madly.

"I never stole a will in all my life, though I'm not a saint in many ways," smiled Felipe. "I say the will of Don Ramon isn't in this house."

"Which means that you know where it is!" roared Con.

Felipe pursed his lips, but said nothing.

"I've said my say," he said after awhile. "I don't intend to bandy words with any man, especially not with Chita Con, the Vulture King of the Desert. We aren't going to get along together; I see that. You want me out of your road; that's plain. You are going to supplant Don Ramon as Nabob of Centipede; that is in your mind. But you'll have your hands full. The boys will obey you; but there will be obstacles in your path. I see through your scheme. You'll wish you were back in the old desert before the game's played out. You—"

Chita Con, with an oath which he could not keep back, sprung forward, but Felipe opened the door and was on the threshold in a jiffy.

"I see! It's war to the knife and the blade to the hilt between us," cried the Mexican, laughing in the overseer's face. "I'm your match in every way. I'm a dozen tigers rolled into one. I know all about your life from away back, and I can put the Yellow Shadower of Centipede upon a lively trail. Don't fool with Felipe, Captain Con. His bite is death!"

The next moment the door had shut, and Chita Con stood in the room its only occupant, staring at the closed portal and breathing in gasps.

"I've got to do but one thing," said he at last. "I must kill that viper. I must crush his head before he stings."

He went back to his work but his heart was no longer in it. He closed the desk, and locking it, threw the keys where he knew Juanita would find them, and went out, to give a new turn to the situation—to deepen the mystery surrounding the strangler's crime, and to bring a new character into the exciting drama.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT DIRRELL FOUND IN A ROCK.

THE man called Don Ramon had been buried and the stars had shed their light upon his grave. The rough fellows who were called his slaves had borne the body on their shoulders to the little cemetery at the foot of the mountain, and Chita Con had announced that he would run the mines for Juanita, which announcement was supposed to have been made with the young girl's approval.

Jaguar Juan had left the town, Felipe also had made himself scarce; at least, he had not been seen since the funeral, and two whole days had passed, and another man had succeeded to the business lately run by Jose, who had been carted to the mountain graveyard without ceremony or mourners.

It was believed by some that Centipede City was destined never to have solved the mystery surrounding Don Ramon's death, for all did not know that the Yellow Shadower had taken an oath to solve it, and when it was known that he was no longer in the city, they thought something had taken him away.

It was the third night after the murder, and Dick Dirrell the young American was riding through the mountains not far from the gold camp. He had been out prospecting with Manuel his friend, but Manuel had ridden ahead, leaving Dick to come on at his leisure, which the fellow was trying his best to do.

The night was one of weird beauty. A round moon was hanging in the heavens, and here and there every tree and rock stood out with striking emphasis.

Dirrell had been riding near the edge of a trail from which could be seen the scattered shanties of Centipede many feet below. If it had been day he could have seen every cabin, but, as it was, he noticed Don Ramon's palace and the den which had been presided over by Jose. He had drawn rein to contemplate this scene, which he could do at his ease, though he was a great distance above it, and the trail winding down the mountain would not take him into the town for nearly an hour.

Presently he heard the neighing of another horse, and in a moment he knew that he was not the only person abroad.

All at once he saw cross a belt of moonlight the figures of a horse and his rider, and the young miner, looking sharp, thought he noticed that the man was masked.

In an instant he thought of Captain Dagger the Arizona outlaw whose deeds had been related by Manuel, and glancing at his revolvers he watched the apparition as it seemed to come nearer. He was not anxious to encounter this

mountain robber, who, according to story, was not averse to taking human life; but from what he had heard of the captain, he had a curiosity which rose within him while he looked at the horseman.

Dirrell suddenly lost sight of the man, but five minutes later he saw down the trail the strange picture of a human figure standing on a saddle.

A dark wall rose for hundreds of feet above the man. It had many crevasses, some of which were large enough to admit a hand, and when Dirrell caught sight of the unknown he seemed to be feeling in one of these.

The moon shining full upon the man and his horse showed both to Dirrell, who had drawn his revolver in expectation of an encounter, for if the stranger should come his way after searching the wall, they were almost sure to meet.

The young American now saw that the face of the man was concealed by a black mask which did not fit very close. He noticed that he wore his hair rather long, but no beard was visible, and that his figure was well knit, and evidently that of a person past thirty.

"Ten chances to one that I'm looking at Captain Dagger," thought Dirrell. "I wish Manuel had stayed with me."

Captain Dagger, if the stranger was really the mountain bandit, did not suspect that he was so closely watched. He continued to stand erect upon his saddle until he had finished his work, when he withdrew his arm with a look of satisfaction.

Dropping back into the saddle, he threw a scrutinizing look around, and then turned back toward the point from which he had come, and to Dirrell's relief rode in that direction.

The miner waited many impatient minutes, and when he was sure he was safe, he rode toward the spot where he had seen the masked mystery, and halted there. Certain hoof-tracks visible in the trail told him exactly where the captain had been, and imitating the example which had been set, Dirrell stood upon his saddle and began to look for the crack in the wall.

It was not long before he found one into which he could thrust his hand, and in a little while he was trying to rob the mountain post-office of any mail it might contain.

Dirrell was successful. His fingers came suddenly in contact with a bit of folded paper, and the next instant he had drawn it forth and was looking at the find in the light of the moon.

He held in his hand a letter traced on heavy paper and written in such dim lines that he could not make them out with the light he had at his command just then.

"It's worth taking down to Manuel," said the young miner. "It looks to me like a bit of cipher, and we can put our heads together over it and make it out. I used to read puzzles when a boy and know something about mysterious writings."

He felt again in the rock, but found nothing more, and hiding what he had found in his bosom, he dropped astride again and rode down the trail.

If Dirrell had tarried on the scene of his discovery he would have been further mystified. He would have seen approach a gliding figure which had the sinuous motion of a snake, though, in shape, it was human. It came from the west, or away from Centipede City, and a pair of intensely black eyes looked at the wall, but every now and then glanced at the moon, as if their owner would have extracted more light from it if he could.

Under the very crevice which Dirrell had robbed, this sneaking human stopped and eyed the crack. He seemed to measure the distance from the ground to it, and then to wonder if he could reach it despite the opposing features of the wall.

At last he drew his soft shoes and cast them aside; then he placed his hands in a narrow crack overhead and drew himself up. He found another crack higher up the wall, thrust his hands into it and ascended still higher. He had the agility of a monkey, and in the moonlight he looked not unlike one.

When the wall-climber reached the crack at which he was aiming, he put his hand in and felt a long time. A shadow of disappointment made his face, dark already, darker still.

"He came this way; I saw him," he growled. "He rode the black, his old steed, and wore the mask. I would have bet my head that he had something for the mountain post-office, but here I find nothing. It is a shame."

He ran his whole arm into the crack; he felt hither and thither until he exhausted his patience, when he dropped to the ground in no enviable humor.

The moon shining upon his face for the first time showed him to be a "Greaser." His yellowish skin was dirty; he had long hair and lively black eyes. And the movements of a cat, too.

In short, the man was our old acquaintance Felipe.

His failure to find something in the rock irritated him, and when he looked toward Centipede City, lying far below the trail, he shook his fist and grinned.

"Not to-night, but some other time," said he.

"I wonder how Captain Con is getting along? Wonder, too, if Jaguar Juan has struck that trail of his. They are fools—both of them! It is the deepest mystery they ever tackled. What was that Con said after I left him in the nabob's house? Whose head is he going to crush before he can sting? Felipe's, Captain Con? I'll be on the top wave when you're food for the vultures you used to tame to hunt the victims of the desert. I'll be nabob when you're dust, ha, ha, ha!"

Felipe looked up at the rock once more and slipped away. He had come to the place for nothing. Was he in league with Captain Dagger, the bandit? If not, why did he expect to find a message of some kind in the mountain post-office?

Meanwhile, Dick Dirrell was approaching Centipede City. The young miner was eager to see Manuel and to show him the prize he had taken from the wall. He had not looked at it since getting hold of it, preferring not to strain his eyes until he could use them to advantage under Manuel's lamp.

Dick rode straight to the cabin which they inhabited, and bursting open the door, confronted Manuel discussing a cold bite.

"Back at last, eh?" asked the big miner. "By heavens, boy, you look like you had some news!"

"What do you call this?" cried Dick, drawing forth the trophy and throwing it across Manuel's plate.

In an instant his big friend had picked it up. "Where did you get it?" asked Manuel, his eyes dilated till they were a curiosity to smiling Dick.

"I robbed a post-office, nothing more. But what does it mean?"

"It's one of Don Ramon's letters."

"Don Ramon's?" exclaimed Dick, springing to the table. "Don Ramon is dead."

"So he is, but this is one of his letters left over. Don't I know the nabob's handwriting?"

The young miner looked nonplused. "But I saw that letter placed to-night," he finally persisted.

"By a living man?"

"Yes."

Manuel fell back in his chair, and gave his friend a wild stare.

"Saw this letter placed?" cried he, glancing at the paper in his hand. "Tell me."

Dirrell soon told his story.

"You must have seen Captain Dagger!" said Manuel, when he had finished.

"I thought so, myself, but you call that letter one of Don Ramon's."

"I did at first," and Manuel's eyes wandered back to the missive, not a word of which he had tried as yet to decipher. "It looks for all the world like the nabob's writing. Hold! let me prove it."

He crossed the room to a heavy chest which stood in one corner. Opening it, he dived into its heart and brought up a batch of letters from the center of which he pulled one which he brought back to the table.

"Six months ago Don Ramon went away quite suddenly, and left this on my table," he said, looking up at Dirrell. "At that time I was trying to trade for a bit of land belonging to him, and as he had to go off in haste, he left this for me. Now, look at the two letters—the one I got, and that which you found in the rocky wall. Neither is written in cipher, though Don Ramon's hand is none of the best. Notice the formation of the e's; see how he ends his h's. My God, Dick, what makes you look so?"

The young American miner had taken the two letters from Manuel's hands, and was staring at them as if the outlines of a ghost had suddenly appeared on the pages.

"The chirography looks the same," he said. "The letters are alike. I would almost swear they were written by the same man, if there wasn't a fresh grave on the mountain."

"You mean that you would say that if Don Ramon wasn't dead, eh?" smiled Manuel.

"Yes."

"Well, I'm about ready to say so if he is. There's no difference in the handwriting of those two letters; the same hand wrote 'em!"

Dirrell's response was an incredulous stare.

CHAPTER VIII.

A WEASEL SHOWS HIS TEETH.

"THE same hand wrote them?" cried the young miner, repeating Manuel's words. "How can that be?"

"I know it looks paradoxical," smiled the big miner, glancing from the letters into his companion's face.

"But dead men don't write letters and leave them in a wall."

"That's a fact, Dick."

"Remember that I saw Captain Dagger deposit the one in your left hand."

"Yes, and that reminds me that we haven't tried to decipher it. Let us see what it says. Perhaps some light will come out of it."

The two comrades now fell to reading the mysterious letter which Dirrell had taken from the cleft in the rock, and it was not long ere they had mastered it as follows:

"FELIPE:—Why don't you come down to the old rendezvous and report? I don't know how affairs are progressing since the mystery. Keep your black eyes open and don't let anybody steal a march on you. We are fooling the hounds in good shape, and a good deal depends upon your tactics. When you get this, don't let grass grow under your feet. The plum is almost ripe and then we will taste the fruit of our long toil."

THE CAPTAIN.

Manuel and Dick read the letter in concert and looked at one another when they were through.

"What do you think now?" asked the big miner.

Dirrell made no reply.

"Mystifies you, eh?"

"I confess that it does."

"Do you think a dead man wrote the letter?"

"That were impossible."

Manuel laughed.

"Right you are, boy!" he exclaimed. "Dead people don't do such things."

"But Don Ramon is dead?"

"Over on the mountain. I saw fresh flowers on the grave to-day. Juanita's been there."

Dirrell was about to reply when a footstep sounded distinctly at the door, and the two friends exchanged hasty looks.

"Somebody's out there," said Manuel in low tones. "I don't like spies," and he went to the door and opened it carefully.

He looked awhile, but saw nothing, and coming back to the table, picked up the stolen letter and looked at it in silence.

"This would be something for Jaguar Juan," said he. "I wonder if the Yellow Shadower has found anything out yet. He went off without letting any of us know of his intended departure. He's slick, and, with that red friend of his—with Mosco, the Indian juggler—he ought to solve the mystery."

"When did this Captain Dagger first make his appearance in this region?" asked Dick.

"About three years ago."

"What was his first act?"

"He held up the Copper City stage and took its freight."

"Was there much to take?"

"Enough to enrich any sensible man."

"Did he do the job alone?"

"Alone. He wore that black mask of his, and sent a bullet through the driver's sleeve, to tell him that he meant business. He was quiet for some months after that. His next job was holding up the same vehicle, and then's when he robbed Don Ramon."

"Did the Don 'sneak'?"

"Not a great deal. He went, though, and posted Captain Dagger all over this district—posted the notices himself, which was regarded as one of the most fearless feats of the day. He offered \$5,000 reward for Captain Dagger, dead or alive, but, of course, he never had to pay the amount."

"Of course not, if I saw the outlaw to-night," said Dick. "Now, Manuel, when did Chita Con come to Centipede?"

Manuel showed his surprise at this query by the look he gave the questioner.

"You switch off on another subject with lots of ease," he smiled. "When did Chita come to Centipede? He was here when I first saw the town."

"In Don Ramon's employ?"

"Don Ramon's right bower."

"Closer to him than Felipe?"

"Not in the same light. Felipe is very close to Don Ramon. He must share the nabob's secrets, which I don't think Chita Con was ever permitted to do. I'll tell you, boy."

Manuel went to the door again and looked out before he continued.

"There's a spy abroad to-night," said he. "I'd bet my head, hair and all, that we've been watched all the time."

"By Felipe, think you?" asked Dirrell.

"I'm not prepared to say; but we've been watched, I tell you. Never mind; we'll get to the end of the tangle one of these days. I rather like the mystery," and Manuel grinned.

He would have resumed if a footstep had not reached the door, and as he turned to investigate, the portal was open, and the figure of a gaunt miner with a red beard appeared.

"What's the matter, Taos?" asked Manuel, struck by the fellow's looks.

"Chita's nabbed the weasel," said the man. "I thought mebbe you'd like to know, and so I came to tell yer."

"Nabbed the weasel, has he?" and Manuel looked at Dick. "You know what Taos means? Chita Con has caught Felipe at some devilment."

In an instant the two men were pressing Taos the miner for particulars, but he did not know much.

"Where are they?" queried Manuel.

"I left 'em at Jose's," was the reply.

"Then he caught the yellow cat in public?"

"Yes; walked into the ranch and saw Felipe ag'in' the bar, takin' his mixed lightning. Felipe looked at Chita with a curious grin, which made the overseer flush. The next moment he had Felipe by the ear, an' was listenin' to his yelps. It war a funny sight, I tell yer, and the hull crowd enjoyed it hugely."

"We'll go see," said Manuel, looking at Dir-

rell, who was eager to depart. "It's war to the knife between the overseer and the spy, and Don Ramon's millions are the stakes of the game. There's more in this than you think, boy."

A minute afterward the two friends, followed by Taos, who had brought the word of Chita's catch, started toward the den lately presided over by Jose.

They could see that the door of the trap stood open, and that a crowd of toughs filled the interior, but could not catch sight of the bronzed overseer and his victim.

"He had 'im by the ear when I left the scene," said Taos. "Mebbe he let up on Felipe, owing to the fact that he was Don Ramon's servant, but the devil war in Chita Con's eye, an' his silk hand seemed ready ter transfer itself from ear to throat; but—"

Taos stopped, for they had reached the door, and the next second the brilliantly lighted room lay before them.

The *habitués* of the place were not gambling now; the greasy cards lay idle on the dirty tables, and curiosity was centered at one end of the bar.

Chita Con stood there white as a cloth, and with a whisky-glass clutched in one of his big hands.

"The man's hurt," whispered Taos. "My head for a football if the weasel didn't bite him."

As Taos spoke the three saw Con throw the glass to his lips, and drain its contents with a single gulp. He brought the heavy glass down upon the counter with a startling emphasis, and looked at the crowd, by which he was regarded in awe-struck silence.

"You don't want to touch him," said he, between his teeth. "The yellow cat belongs to me. I know where he hides, and though he flees, he sha'n't escape. He is mine. I feel the knife here." Chita placed his hand on his left breast, "though I know he took the infernal blade with him. It's an old grudge, with variations. You don't know anything, you men don't. I could tell you something that would open your eyes; but I won't. I say you don't want to touch Felipe. He belongs to me—he and his master!"

The big man spoke slow and labored, and at the conclusion of his speech he looked at the bar-keeper, who filled the glass once more, and it was emptied with the same avidity.

"I'm not dead!" cried Chita, pushing back the men who proffered assistance as he started toward the door. "I'm worth a thousand stiff's," and laughing at his own words, he strode away, watched by the crowd until he was no longer to be seen.

Then it was that Manuel and Dirrell learned that after his arrest Felipe had drawn his knife and struck for Chita's heart, missing that organ by perhaps a hair. The Mexican was quicker than a cat, said those who had witnessed the act, and when Chita fell back, releasing his captive as the blade went home, Felipe bounded from the den and was gone before a hand could apprehend him.

While the crowd was discussing the event, there came in by the door a man who attracted attention from the moment he was seen.

"He's back," went from mouth to mouth. "The Yellow Shadow has come home once more."

Yes, Jaguar Juan had come back, for he stood at the bar filling a glass with his favorite tipple, and apparently unconscious of the looks he was receiving.

The detective of Centipede looked fresh, though his garments, dusty and travel-stained, told that he had been among the mountain trails, and when he had drank, he turned and smiled at the crowd.

"If you'd 'a' come a little sooner you'd hev seen Felipe cut Chita Con," ventured some one.

"Felipe?" echoed the ferret, as if the name surprised him.

"Felipe, the Greaser," was the answer.

"Did it happen here?"

"Right whar you stand, captain. That's blood at yer feet; it's Chita's."

"I always knew the weasel would bite," smiled the detective, and without another word, Jaguar Juan walked out, leaving the men of Centipede to stare curiously at each other.

The detective walked not toward the house he occupied when at home in the mining-camp, but crossed the ground and rung the bell of Don Ramon's mansion.

In a moment his summons was answered, and he stood face to face with Juanita. The heiress of the nabob's millions started when she saw the figure of her sworn avenger, and, holding the door open, begged him to enter.

"You have been away!" she cried, her white hand closing on his arm, while she looked into his face. "You are keen and cautious. You have found the trail of the man who killed Don Ramon. For heaven's sake, name him. Tell me who came like a thief in the night and took his life."

A strange smile overspread the ferret's face. His hand darted forward and closed on Juanita's wrist.

"Don Ramon hasn't been killed," said he.

Juanita drew back the length of his arm and then laughed derisively.

"Not dead? When did you lose your senses, Jaguar Juan? Not dead? I saw him dead in his chair and so did you. I followed him to the cemetery on the mountain slope. I swore you to vengeance, and here you are with a wild story which no person can credit."

"I will prove it, though in the end he will be dead," answered the detective. "I have been on the trail of vengeance these many years. I knew you would doubt me, but Don Ramon lives to be hanged yet."

"Then, in God's name, who was killed in this house?"

There was no answer.

CHAPTER IX.

THE UNKNOWN AGAIN.

"You are not going to tell me, I see," continued Juanita. "You intend to keep from me the truth, if you really know it. You say that Don Ramon was not killed by the mysterious hand—that he is not sleeping to-night on the slope. I have asked you for the truth, but you are silent. You refuse to tell me who was killed here. Why do you keep such things from me—from Don Ramon's child?"

The Yellow Shadower looked into the deep eyes of the fair girl, but said nothing.

"Keep your secret if it be a true one," said Juanita. "I may take the trail myself. I may run down the man who came here with murder in his heart and took a life."

"You, girl?"

"Why not? Would I be the first who took the trail of vengeance?"

"No, but—"

"Tell me, then, and keep me back."

"Jaguar Juan shook his head."

"You refuse, do you?"

"I cannot tell you now," said he.

"You mean that you are ready to break your oath, that you have made a discovery which I am not to know. But I do not dismiss you. No, Captain Juan, you are still my avenger. I have sworn you on the most precious thing on earth—the cross of the Redeemer. You swore to find the hand that did the deed of blood in yonder room."

"I will find it!" replied the detective resolutely. "I have not forgotten one syllable of my oath."

Juanita seemed to draw back and study him for a moment.

"Do you know what happened at Jose's awhile ago?" asked the ferret.

"Yes; Felipe cut Captain Con," answered the girl with a smile.

"The weasel showed his teeth," added Juan.

"And sharper teeth were never shown. Was it a deep stab?"

"Not deep enough to kill the big overseer. Chita Con is worth a dozen dead men; he will turn on Felipe and pay him back for that little cut."

"If he can," laughed the girl. "What became of Felipe?"

"He has vanished."

Juanita crossed the room and took from a table a long-bladed dagger whose blade shone in the lamp-light as she bore it toward the detective.

"I shall take this with me," she said, looking Jaguar Juan in the face.

"Are you going upon the trail?"

"I am. I shall find the hand that took the life of the man buried as Don Ramon, and to me Don Ramon he is."

Juan smiled.

"I shall lock up the palace to-morrow—may be to-night," she went on. "I shall be my own ferret—the woman avenger of the Santa Rita Hills. I shall find the trail of this silken hand. I will not turn back until I have avenged the death of the man who made me his child and heir. You have another mission; you have been here a long time for a purpose. They have said that you were Don Ramon's shadow—that you were biding your time to arrest him for some crime—for some old misdemeanor of his past life. I now believe this, though I contradicted the report before. You are a trail-dog—a secret man-hunter. I don't seek to know why you watched Don Ramon. That is your business; but I will know who strangled his victim in this house, and, though the trail leads to the uttermost ends of the earth and through perils of death, I will not turn back until my mission is finished."

Juanita stood erect before the detective of Centipede with the dagger raised above her head, and her brilliant eyes on fire.

"By the cross—the holiest thing I know—by the hope I have of another life when this is passed—by the heaven above me, I swear to kill the man who strangled Don Ramon!" she cried.

Jaguar Juan from the seat he had taken looked up at her with a smile.

"You may regret your oath," he said.

"You mean that I may break it," she answered.

"You don't know what lies ahead."

"Because you have told me that Don Ramon wasn't murdered?" exclaimed Juanita. "Hal I

understand you men sometimes. You want me to keep from the trail. No, I am at it now. I am from this time Juanita the Avenger!"

She threw the knife upon the table and stepped back after the act.

The detective got up and moved toward the door.

"Are you going back to the trail to baffle me?" asked the girl.

"I am going back to it," said he. "You forget that you sent me to it—that I am your ferret, sworn to find the hand that choked the man, called by you Don Ramon, to death."

"Then we may meet on that trail."

Jaguar Juan touched his broad-rimmed hat and bowed. There was a singular smile at his lips, a strange glitter in the depths of his eyes.

Juanita stood statue-like in the middle of the room and watched him until he went away shutting the door after him, and disappearing with the noiselessness of a retreating panther.

He had barely left the room ere the nabob's heir snatched up the dagger and rushed out. She ran along the corridor and opened a door at the furthest end, where she stood a moment with her fingers wound around the pearl handle of the knife and with her breath broken into gasps.

"Why do it?" suddenly cried Juanita, drawing back. "If I expect to succeed on the trail I must curb my spirit better than this. He would not surrender his secret if I were to catch him by the throat and threaten him with the dagger. Jaguar Juan is as cool as cool can be. I must get at his secret some other way. What has he discovered since the murder of Don Ramon? He has been on the trail, and if it be true that the Indian juggler, Mosco the Maricopa, is his pard, then he has not been there alone. I hate that Indian. The first time he saw me I trembled with an unknown fear, and Don Ramon, who witnessed the meeting, went straight to Felipe and said something which made Felipe shake his head."

Juanita went back into the house and entered her own room. Crossing the soft carpet, she threw back the curtains and looked out.

The moon was shining with great brilliance. She could see the shrubbery in the garden below—the long stems of the cacti, and here and there a bush covered with flowers peculiar to the clime. Far away in the night lay the mountain where two fresh graves had been made—Joe's and—Don Ramon's?

Juanita seemed to fix her gaze upon the slope of the mountain, as if she longed to go thither and solve the mystery of one of those mounds! She stood at the window a long time, and was about to drop the curtain, when there came into view a figure which from the first held her attention.

The nabob's heiress clutched the curtain and watched the apparition with all eyes. It had the shape of a human being, yet it seemed to crawl near the ground like a beast of prey; there was something fascinating in its movements.

Juanita saw it approach the palace, and when near it, but still in the garden, it rose and became a man in reality. She saw it rise in the shadow of a cactus and stretch itself.

Then she saw more than she had before seen.

Was it a man? Wasn't there something about it which made her doubt her first belief?

She looked at the figure as she had never looked at anything before, and now she thought she had made a discovery as important as the secret Jaguar Juan was keeping from her.

For five minutes the figure of the night-creeper remained in the shadow of the cactus, studying the palace, as it seemed, then it moved forward again and disappeared beneath the window.

Juanita fell back with a cry and rushed from the room. Once more her fingers encircled the dagger.

She ran down the stair, taking two steps at a time, in the excitement of the moment, and at last stood in the hall below, with palpitating heart and a face which had no color.

Juanita was waiting tigress-like for the person outside to come in. She leaned against the wall and calmed herself; but did not forget the weapon in her hand.

Seconds seemed hours to the nabob's child.

By and by a sound reached her ears and tightened her grip on the knife. Some one was just outside, and she felt that in a moment she would stand face to face with the Unknown.

But the sound was not repeated, and Juanita stood a long time in the deepest silence. She grew impatient. Had the prowler slipped away, and was she to be cheated in the end?

Suddenly there came to her ears the opening of a door. It was behind her—in the darkest part of the corridor, and when she turned she felt that the prowler had stolen a march upon her.

Juanita's eyes tried to pierce the shadows that lay between her and the end of the hall, and eager to do so, she took a step forward, and then stopped, trembling in every limb.

The new-comer stood before her. The figure she had seen in the garden stood beneath her roof, filling her with a feeling impossible to describe.

While Juanita looked the Unknown came forward again.

It was not the slow, fascinating glide of a ghost, but the swift, noiseless stalk of the tiger.

Juanita felt that she could not move; the fear of something she could not analyze held her against the cold wall.

"What, you?" said a voice the sound of which she had never heard before. "Well, if I can't find the old beast I can deal with the cub. Ah, have I frightened you into a statue?"

There fell upon Juanita at this moment a hand which she could not escape. It closed on her shoulder and held as in a grip of steel.

She saw that the person before her was of her own sex; but such eyes! The face was white like a face cut from marble; the lines, hard and cruel, but at the same time there was about the countenance something terribly beautiful.

"If I can't kill the tiger I can kill his heir!" said that same dread voice. "I can kill what I find and find the rest some other time. You don't look much like him, but your blood is in his veins, and that's enough."

The hand left Juanita's shoulder and fastened on her throat. She tried to cry out, but her attempt died away in a feeble gasp, and she felt in her blood the chilling sensation of death.

Darker and darker grew the scene; she struggled a little, but the hand was like iron in its relentlessness, though to her throat it felt as soft as a glove.

All at once a terrible thought rushed through her brain. She remembered that Don Ramon had been choked to death—that on his throat she had seen with her own eyes the marks of the deadly fingers. Were not those very fingers at her own throat now? Had not the silken hand of the unknown destroyer come back to complete the destruction of the household of Don Ramon?

She was on the threshold of a part of Jaguar Juan's secret; she knew—But why think of such things in the agonies of dissolution?

Juanita, in the grip of the unknown hand, made a supreme effort to escape. She put forth all her strength, seized the wrist of the destroyer and actually broke its hold. Then she fell back toward the door, and found her tongue. A wild shriek poured from her throat; she cried for help at the top of her voice; she grasped the door-knob—would to God it had been the dagger which she had dropped—but in vain!

The Unknown came down upon her again with a cry of victory; the soft hand seized her throat once more, and all became dark.

CHAPTER X.

DIRRELL IN THE TOILS.

IF Juanita had seen the strange person discovered in the palace on a former occasion by Jaguar Juan, the detective, she would have believed that she had fallen into the clutches of the same Unknown.

There was something terrible in the grip of that soft hand, and the nabob's heir felt it sinking into her throat, not harshly, but with a singular fascination which she did not want to resist.

Darkness came. Juanita lay on the floor of the corridor, and the strangler was gone.

No one had heard her pass from the house, and the stars shining in the vault of heaven seemed loth to reveal her trail to the hunter.

But she was seen ere she left the camp.

A man standing near the nabob's palace, in fact, looking at it that very moment, saw a figure gliding from toward it—making for the shadows of the everlasting hills.

"Is that Juanita?" the man asked himself. "The walk is that of a woman, and the girl may be quitting the palace on some nocturnal expedition."

The next moment he saw more. The person so closely watched reached a spot clear of moonshine, and for a second stood revealed, but not as Juanita of Centipede.

"My God, a strange creature," cried the watcher. "What would Manuel say if he could see her? What a figure she has—as lithe as an Indian lance, and as supple as its owner! Has she come into this strange mystery? Does Jaguar Juan know?"

The sentence was broken by the sudden start of the Unknown, and the watcher, who was Dick Dirrell, the young American, moved after her.

He kept in the shade of the trees and bushes that fringed that particular street of Centipede, and followed the woman to the edge of the city. There he saw her turn and draw her figure to its true stature while she stood in her tracks a moment, looking triumphantly toward the houses she had left behind.

"A mystery, by all that's holy!" ejaculated the young miner. "She knows something about Don Ramon's death. This beautiful creature may be a merciless destroyer. Her hands look innocent enough, but they may be able to strangle a sleeping giant."

Dirrell stood still until the woman, having had her look out, turned once more toward the mountains and passed so suddenly out of sight that she seemed to have vanished in mid-air.

Manuel's friend went slowly back to the heart of Centipede. What made him think that the Unknown had visited the nabob's house?

He found himself in the moonlight in front of the palace; he advanced toward the door, wondering if Juanita knew anything about the coming of the strange creature. He was within a few feet of the threshold when a glance downward at the ground at his feet showed him a foot-track in the soft earth—one but lately made, for the nails of the delicate heel had left their impression.

"The tigress has been here," said Dirrell to himself. "This woman with the demon face—this unknown, soft-handed strangler, for to me she is nothing else—knowing what I do of Don Ramon and his story—has called upon Juanita!"

He had never met the daughter of the Nabob of Centipede. He had seen the beautiful girl, had touched his hat to her, a day or so before the murder—that was all.

Manuel had promised that he should meet her, Manuel knew her well, and he had looked forward to a pleasant acquaintanceship; but the crime had spoiled all that.

Now, what ought he to do? Something told him that all was not well beyond the door of the dead nabob's house, that the figure he had seen quit the camp had committed a crime beside which, perhaps, the death of Don Ramon was a tame affair.

Dirrell, who had spent some years on the Southwest border, knew the revengeful hearts of the dark-skinned beauties.

For him to think of these things was to end by going up the steps and trying the door. The moment he touched the knob it yielded, and he opened the door and entered.

He shut the portal behind him and stood in the dark hall. A deathlike silence pervaded the place. Dirrell saw nothing ahead but an unbroken shadow.

The very silence spoke of crime, of mystery and death.

Dirrell advanced down the corridor and passed into another room of the house.

He found there an open door, and, passing it, reached another hall.

Then, for the first time, he saw his way. A lamp hung from the ceiling and showed him that at the end of this hall was another portal.

But Dirrell saw more than the door.

Something strangely human in shape was lying on the floor, just as it had been left by some one.

A swift spring took the American forward, and he halted over the body of Juanita, the victim of the Unknown.

Dirrell received a shock when he bent over the blackened face of the nabob's heiress, and for a second thought her dead. His heart beat again when he put down his hand and found that the face was warm, and that the pulse beat, though sluggishly.

He was startled by a footstep that sent a thrill through his whole frame, for it seemed to be very near, and, looking up, he fell back from the sight before him with a loud cry.

Not ten feet away stood the tall form of Chita Con, the overseer of the nabob's bonanzas.

Dirrell felt the blood of indignation rush to his brain.

After all, he may have been mistaken; he may have accused the wrong person. The overseer, and not the Unknown, might be responsible for the new crime which had been committed.

The two men faced one another in silence for a long minute. At the end of that time the hand of Chita Con came up, and Dirrell saw in it the six-shooter of the border.

In the twinkling of an eye he was covered by the giant's weapon.

"What made you come back to her?" said the overseer, glancing at the motionless form at Dirrell's feet. "I told the boys when you came to camp that you wasn't as clean as you looked. I've seen a good deal of your people in my time. You and your pard have been playing a deep game, but I reckon it's about its end."

Dirrell flushed.

"Please don't throw up your hand," continued Chita Con, with a deep laugh. "I call this taken in the act. We've got something like a vengeance court here, and there'll be no shamming when it gets to work in earnest!"

The young miner took another step forward, despite the menace of the revolver.

"What do you mean?" he cried. "I came here because I saw something on the outside that rendered me suspicious. I did not expect to find you in the house."

"Of course not," grinned Captain Con. "I'm generally where I'm not expected. That knife of Felipe's missed my heart and inflicted, after all, a baby wound. I'm a better detective than Jaguar Juan. He's running all over the country looking for the hand that strangled Don Ramon, while I've found it in his own house."

"You miserable wretch—"

"Don't waste words," interrupted Chita Con. "You'll need all you can command when the Tribunal sits."

"I see through your infernal scheme!" cried Dirrell. "Show me your Tribunal."

There was a devilish victory in the deep eyes of the overseer. He looked at Dirrell, and then threw a quick glance at the figure on the floor.

"I'll dispose of you first," said he, addressing his prisoner. "About, face!"

Dirrell obeyed with blanched face and welded lips.

Accused of the murder of Don Ramon, and of an attempt on the life of Juanita! He could not help smiling at the situation, for he felt that when she recovered the fair girl would clear his skirts, and, with such thought to keep him company, he allowed himself to be led away at the mercy of Chita Con's six-shooter.

Dirrell's second thought was of Manuel, his staunch friend.

Manuel would stand by him to the last, and Manuel was a host.

It was not long ere Dirrell found himself in the center of a crowd in Jose's old trap. He had been conducted thither by Chita Con, and accused of the attempted murder of Juanita, the nabob's heiress. Had he not been found on the scene of the crime by the overseer himself? Was he not stooping over the form of the young girl when Chita Con surprised him?

Dirrell saw about him the slaves of Don Ramon, now transferred to Captain Con's employ. He noticed the lowering glances from under dark brows, and saw that many a hand rested on the butt of a revolver near a miner's belt.

Americanism was at a discount in Centipede, and had always been. He and Manuel were the only full-blooded Americans in the town; the rest were yellow-featured men, with the blood of the Southwest in their veins; desperadoes who had no love for the flag which floated over the Territory, and in the whole gang there was not one who was not ready at the drop of a hat to cut a Yankee throat.

Manuel had held his own among these men by a display of coolness which was not permitted to lag for a moment. They knew that he would shoot without a word, and thus he had made money under their very noses while they would have silenced him if they had dared.

Dirrell felt his peril when he found himself in the toils and standing before the men of Centipede—Chita Con's minions.

He saw the crowd contract its circle and moved closer to the bar against which he placed his back and felt for his revolver.

A smile passed over Chita Con's face when he saw this movement, and Dirrell knowing that the drawing of the weapon would only precipitate matters and open a forlorn fight against odds, let his hand slip from the six-shooter.

"They can't prove me guilty," thought he. "The recovery of Juanita is but a question of time. Chita Con is at the bottom of the plot. The yellow devil is playing a game of his own, and he seized the opportunity which offered to rid him of an American."

Then it was that Dirrell loftily denied the infamous charges.

He told the throng that Juanita would clear him when she recovered, and rather broadly intimated that some one—he looked straight at Chita Con while he talked—was playing a scheme in his own interest.

"What, I kill Don Ramon?" cried Dirrell. "Why, the man was a total stranger to me. We had never met beyond an introduction. What I knew about him was hearsay, and as for Juanita, his child, we have never spoken. I denounce the charge as infamous, and assert that it covers an infernal plot, the originator of which shall pay—"

"No more now, if you please," roared Chita Con, at this juncture. "The prisoner will make his statements before the Tribunal which will convene at the call of its judge. When shall it meet, major?"

There stepped from one edge of the crowd a little man barely five feet tall, with long hair and a decidedly Spanish cast of countenance.

This was Major Serafe, owner of two mines and some times judge of Centipede's court called the Tribunal.

"I shall convene the Tribunal for to-morrow at ten," said this individual, with an assumed judicial air which was disgusting.

Dirrell was about to speak when a man entered the den and advanced toward him holding aloft a small bit of paper. The prisoner knew the man, for the person who had volunteered at his request to go for Manuel.

Dirrell's face lost color when he took the paper from the man's hand, and the next moment he had read:

"DICK:—Business calls me from Centipede for several days. Take care of yourself. MANUEL."

Dirrell seemed to gasp.

He was in the toils of Chita Con and his man tigers.

CHAPTER XI.

THE YELLOW SPY'S REPORT.

LEANING against the wall of the catin, to which he had been consigned under guard by the so-called Tribunal of Centipede City, was Dirrell, the young miner.

The lamp which burned on the table threw a sickly light over a portion of the meager room, and the prisoner could see now and then the bearded face which looked in at the window. It was the face of a guard.

Manuel out of town. The thought was not cheering to the prisoner of Chita Con and his men.

Dirrell had read Manuel's note again and again. It had been left on the table for him to be found by the tough who had gone to the cabin to tell the big miner of the arrest of his companion.

The young man was deep in the toils, and while he leaned against the rough wall of the shanty he had for a pleasing reflection the knowledge that the Tribunal would convene the coming morning for his trial. There was no way of getting Manuel back in time to be of service to him. The miner might be miles away and, then, there was no telling what route he had taken, nor the import of his mission.

While Dirrell stood silent and reflective in the light of the lamp, two men in another part of the gold camp were having a season of rejoicing.

These were Chita Con and Major Serafe, the Judge-Advocate of the one-sided Tribunal.

"What's your opinion?" asked the major, twisting his mustache with a yellow hand which had one finger missing. "Of course you have an opinion, captain."

"I've got one, certainly," was the answer. "She came back."

Major Serafe started.

"She came back?" he repeated. "Who came back?"

Chita Con fell back laughing at the countenance displayed for his inspection. The two men occupied stools in the heart of one of Don Ramon's mines, having come to the place to have a talk where they knew they would not be disturbed.

"Have you forgotten?" he queried, leaning forward and looking the major in the eye. "When I say she came back, I can refer but to one person. Perdita."

A singular change came over Major Serafe's face. White and interested before, it flushed now, and he seemed to recoil.

"Not the old Perdita?" he exclaimed.

"Is there another?" asked Chita Con.

"She had a child, you know."

"But she wouldn't strangle it; no, she wouldn't do that, major," said the overseer, quickly. "When I speak of Perdita I refer to the one we used to hear so much of years ago—the beauty of the Southern border, the rose of the desert."

"I thought her dead. It was rumored—"

"That the vultures found her one day and finished her?" smiled Con.

"But it wasn't true, eh?"

"How could it be if she was in Centipede this very night, when her silken haud found a white throat?"

There was no answer.

"She intends to annihilate the race," continued Chita. "She did not find Don Ramon here, and the sight of the girl set her wild. She could not keep her hands from Juanita's throat, and she left her for dead in the palace. By Jove; things come round nicely when you least expect them to. If I had not been in the house he would have escaped us."

"But he cannot now," grinned the major.

"Escape the Tribunal?" cried Chita Con, bringing his hand down upon the table by way of emphasis. "I'd like to see him get away. We've got a twist on one of the American pair at last, and we must make the best of it before the other one comes back."

"The Tribunal can finish him, too," remarked the major.

"Yes, but we can take them one at a time easier. The moment I saw him in the house bending over the nabob's child I got an inspiration, and knew that I had him in the death toils of Centipede. We can bring the girl to court to-morrow if he insists; but she will only fasten the clamps on him."

"If she remains in her present condition."

"She will do that. The grip of the revenge was almost fatal. A little more pressure would have finished the job."

Major Serafe drew from his pocket a cigar which he lit and began to smoke.

"The game looks nearly won," he said, looking at Chita Con through the smoke.

"We're nearly there," was the answer.

"Don Ramon died in the nick of time."

Chita Con burst into a laugh.

"Did you ever see anything like it?" he exclaimed. "It saved us trouble; it was like drawing the last Jack from the deck."

The two men sat silent for a moment.

"What will Jaguar Juan discover?" asked the major. "He's on the trail, you know?"

"He may find the hand that did it; but what if he does? He won't find us mixed up in the murder. If he meddles when he comes back, we must look to him."

"And Felipe?"

"The weasel won't come back for some time, if ever," said Con. "He knows what I have for him. We're pretty well rid of the vermin, and the prize is within our grasp. Instead of but one nabob in Centipede there will be two—you and I, major, ha, ha, ha!"

Both men laughed together.

"I can't get over what you've said about

Perdita," suddenly said Major Serafe, nervously twisting his mustache again.

"Don't you like her?"

"See what a throat I have," and the speaker drew his hand from left to right under his chin.

"Do you think it would just fit her hand?" laughed Chita Con.

"I don't want it to, at any rate. This woman alive and killing people in Centipede!"

"She's killed no one yet," put in Chita Con.

"But look at Juanita. If she remains in her present condition, she's worse than dead. Choked into insanity. How would you like the prospect?"

"Not very well, of course. The girl was young and pretty. What a companion she would have made for a nabob like me!"

Chita Con got up and stood in the light of the mine-lamp, showing off his splendid figure to the admiring major.

"But you won't want her now?" he asked. "The prize will come without her."

"Yes, but she would have been desirable. I could have run the bonanzas ostensibly in her interests, when, in reality, my dear major, they would have been run in ours. We must take full charge now. You shall be appointed guardian of Juanita, and I will be at the head of the estate. Jupiter! what a lay-out! Millions to command, and the Tribunal to back us. We'll have no one to oppose us when we are in clover."

"There's Captain Dagger?" suggested Major Serafe.

Chita Con looked sober for a moment, and then smiled.

"There's honor among thieves," he said. "Captain Dagger won't have Don Ramon to deal with. If the fellow is very exacting, we can come down a little and kill him the first opportunity."

"That'll do," replied the little conspirator, rubbing his yellow hands. "When this Manuel comes back we'll have the net spread, and he'll be caught before he suspects."

"Certainly. We have all the cards. Don Ramon dead, Juanita crazy, the mines in our hands. What better would you want? There can be no failure, eh, major?"

"I fail to see where one can get in."

All this while, lying overhead and alongside the shelf of the underground chamber, was the form of a human being. The eyes that regarded Chita Con and his companion were as black as night and full of deep malice. Not for a moment did they quit the two conspirators, and not a syllable of their conversation escaped the spy's ears.

If Chita had looked up he would not have seen the spy, though he lay directly overhead, and so he talked on disclosing their plans and giving the motionless figure on the "shelf" all the information he wanted.

By and by the two scoundrels left the mine and groped their way toward the mouth. The spy disappeared and crawled away through darkness, chuckling to himself and laughing aloud at times over his success.

Chita and the major emerged from the mine and went toward the one resort of Centipede's tough population, Jose's old den. The spy did not follow, but glided toward the mountain and vanished there.

He kept up the slope, finding the trail with the ease of a fox, and when he had reached a point far above Centipede he came suddenly upon a masked man on horseback.

"Back, are you?" asked the masked one, greeting the spy with a smile. "I've been waiting some time."

"I couldn't come quicker; there's news."

"News? I'm glad you brought some. How's Juanita, the beautiful?" The spy came closer to the man on the horse and placed one hand on his knee.

"It's bad about her," he said. "I guess she's gone crazy."

There was a quick start on the part of the person in the saddle, and he caught the spy by the collar.

"What, Juanita the lovely, crazy?" he cried. "Is this the best news you bring me from the camp?"

"That's the outlook," was the reply. "The girl's been choked nearly to death, and in the palace, too."

"When did it happen?"

"This very night! They've arrested a man for the crime, and to-morrow the Tribunal takes hold of him."

"Major Serafe's anaconda, eh? Who had the man arrested?"

"Chita Con."

"Who is the prisoner?"

"Manuel's friend—the other American."

"I would have guessed him," exclaimed the masked man. "It's a put-up job, don't you think?"

"A cold deck," was the quick rejoinder.

A moment's silence fell between the two men. "Don't you think it about time for Captain Dagger to come into the game?" queried the masked one.

"I do. They're going to carry things with a high hand. I heard enough to-night to let me

into the whole plot. A pretty mess they'll make of it—Chita Con and Major Serafe. Don Ramon, of course, is dead and buried—"

"I can swear to that if necessary," broke in Captain Dagger, with a curious laugh. "He's as dead as Pharaoh to yon camp," and the hand of the Arizona bandit pointed down the mountain. "I long to enter the play and to show these grasping devils that Captain Dagger is a host, and I will do it. But who choked Juanita?"

The spy on the ground looked up into the black eyes a full minute before he answered.

"Captain Chita says Perdita did it," said he. "Perdita?" echoed the man in the saddle.

"Do you believe that, Felipe?"

The spy did not speak.

"It is impossible," continued Captain Dagger. "That woman was devoured by vultures years and years ago. She strangle Juanita, the fair? I don't believe it! She was as good as dead when I saw her last. But you believe what Chita said—I know you do, Felipe."

"I saw the strangler's foot-track, captain? was the retort.

CHAPTER XII.

BANDIT AND BRUTE.

THE man called Captain Dagger looked strangely at Felipe a moment, and then bending over him, laid his hand on his shoulder and said:

"You saw her foot-track did you, Felipe? Are you sure it was not a man's?"

"I am," answered Felipe with positiveness. "I know the boots of Centipede. Captain, the foot that made the track in front of the palace belongs to a woman; I care not what you think."

The figure of the outlaw straightened in the saddle, but the dark eyes still watched Felipe.

"Let it pass," said the concealed lips. "A woman's foot, eh? We shall get at this mystery by and by. I must go back. Eyes open, Felipe; ears, too."

Felipe, slave-like, touched his hat and bowed; then he stepped back and saw the black horse that carried the masked mystery of Arizona canter down the trail, and he watched both horse and rider until the shadows hid them from view.

"It's getting interesting," said the Mexican to himself, with one of his deep smiles. "There will be some hot work now. The American is in the toils, and, if Manuel comes not back, he is doomed. And, by Jupiter! I don't believe even Manuel could save him."

Half an hour later the scene of the interview was quite deserted, and Captain Dagger and Felipe had gone different roads.

If the yellow cat of Centipede had followed the masked rider, he would have seen him ride a long distance without drawing rein.

Not once did he lift his mask, but all the time the keen eyes behind it let nothing escape them.

At times he rode erect, and then assumed a reflective pose, as if Felipe's revelations about the foot-track in the sand near Don Ramon's mansion was preying upon his mind. He rode until the stars pointed to near midnight, and when he checked the speed of his steed he was on a high trail from which he could look down upon a dark valley with here and there a light indicating where some ranch stood.

"I'll go down and see the old fellow," said the bandit, addressing himself, and turning his horse's head down the mountain, he rode toward the lights he had seen.

In a little time he had reached the valley and was riding up to an humble shanty almost hidden in a grove of cacti, through which his thin-skinned steed picked his way with care.

He rode so close to the door of the hut that he could knock without dismounting, and in a moment the portal opened and the repulsive face of an old man made its appearance.

"Gabriel?" ventured Captain Dagger.

"Holy Mother!" exclaimed the old fellow, showing a set of yellow and broken teeth. "You are late, but always welcome, captain," and the door was held open for the bandit, who slid to the ground and went forward.

The interior of the shanty was as uncouth as the outside. There were to be seen a stool, a table and a dirty cot, the latter reeking with vermin.

In the poor light that struggled to reveal the interior of the place the old man became a person of seventy, dark of skin and desperate looking.

He was somewhat stooped, while his visitor was as straight as an Indian lance, the two making quite a contrast.

"I've had a long ride, Gabriel," said Captain Dagger, looking at his boots, which proved his assertion. "I haven't replenished my purse for many days, but I guess I've got something for you."

At the same time he drew some yellow coin from his pocket, and threw it upon the table, to see the hand of Gabriel pounce upon it like a hawk.

"Gabriel," Captain Dagger went on, elevating his boots upon the table, "do you know what's happened?"

"The unexpected, I'll bet my head," was the

reply. "But how should I know, living here with no one to tell me anything?"

"But your memory is good, eh, Gabriel?"

"I never forget anything, captain. Ask me about events that happened when I was a boy, and I will give you the full history. Ah, you delight me when you mention my memory."

"I'm glad of that. I want to use that memory of yours. Let me see: When was the Red Ranch burned?"

Gabriel reflected for a moment.

"To-morrow night will make nineteen years to the day," he answered.

"I thought it was somewhere near that," said Captain Dagger. "And afterward you saw her for the last time—"

He paused and looked at old Gabriel, who had bent toward him and was eying him with all his might.

"What in the devil's name is up?" cried the bandit. "Here I make a simple reference, and you stare me out of countenance. Look with some gentility, Gabriel. I'm going back to my question. How long after the destruction of the Red Ranch did you see her for the last time?"

Gabriel caught his breath with a gasp.

"It might have been two years, captain," he said.

"What was her condition then?"

"She was riding over the Great Waste?"

"The Devil's Desert, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Was it at night, Gabriel?"

"No, it was high noon."

"And hot?"

"The air was a furnace."

"And she was riding in this heat—she, a beautiful, fair-skinned creature?"

Old Gabriel showed his teeth again.

"She couldn't help herself, captain," he grinned. "When one is tied to the back of a horse, he must put up with the situation."

"Right, you are, old fellow," smiled Captain Dagger. "But don't break my thoughts. You followed her?"

Gabriel nodded.

"You rode beside her for some time?"

"You know this already, captain."

"Until she died?"

Gabriel held back for a second.

"Until she died!" he answered, with a good deal of positiveness.

Captain Dagger fell back and looked at the old rascal a long minute.

"You'll stick to that statement, will you?" he asked, slowly.

Old Gabriel laid his dark hand upon his bosom where he was supposed to have a heart.

"By the cross, captain," said he. "She was dead!"

"You are delightfully positive," rejoined the outlaw of the hills. "You're not the sort of vulture that leaves one while life remains. I ought to believe you, Gabriel, yet—"

He seemed to take delight in stopping right there, and giving the old scamp some keen torture.

"You don't mean to say, captain, that she wasn't dead when I left her in the Devil's Desert?" he gasped.

"After hearing your testimony?" said the bandit. "Your memory never fails you, you say."

"Never, though I'm not as young as I used to be. I recollect that day in the desert. She could not speak, but with one hand she traced a word on the neck of her steel."

"Ah. One word, Gabriel!"

"No more, and, under the circumstances, captain, it was just the word, too."

"And it was—"

"Vengeance!"

Captain Dagger's eyes seemed to tell of a change of color, but the dark mask prevented Gabriel from seeing it.

"She did not last long after that. She looked at the word, then at me, and died with her eyes going back to the last letters she had traced."

The hand of the bandit played awhile with the tassel of his sash.

He was watched by the old man standing over him, and knew that the wicked eyes of Gabriel were studying him all the time.

"I'd like to ask you, captain—if you will let me—"

"Go on," said the outlaw.

"That happened years and years ago. I wasn't very young then, but I have a good memory—"

"Hang your memory!" interjected Captain Dagger. "Come to the point."

"Do you think she didn't die then?"

It was out, and Gabriel felt relieved.

"See here, some strange things happen this side of the river of death. We've heard of headless horsemen, and you say to this day that you once saw such an apparition on the Rio Grande."

Old Gabriel crossed himself.

"Well, if a horseman could ride without a head, why couldn't a woman, picked and torn by vultures and pronounced dead by a man of good memory, come back to earth and do some singular things?"

The effect of these words upon the old man

was marvelous. He fell back, staring at Captain Dagger, his lips trembling, and his eyes on the eve of quitting his head.

"I haven't said that she is doing such deeds, but if a headless horseman can ride the plains—"

"Holy Mother! if she lives, then I vamoose this ranch," broke in Gabriel. "She will hunt me down. I could have released her, but would not. I kept her company over a league of the Devil's Desert—I saw the big birds overhead, I heard the flap of their wings, and when I left her—"

"To save yourself from their beaks?" laughed the bandit.

"To carry the news to you, captain. I say, when I left her, she was to all appearances dead."

"Not quite so positive now," said the outlaw, with a sinister smile; but Gabriel did not seem to notice the thrust.

He moved back and took a revolver from beneath the pillow of the dirty cot. Then he went to the wall and donned a jacket which still retained some evidence of former gaudiness. Captain Dagger watched him all the time.

"The first comer can have the ranch," said Gabriel. "I don't want it any longer. It hasn't yielded me much, but I've been secluded here—safe until now."

"Are you you going away?"

"I am."

"Whither?"

"Beyond the reach of that woman's hand."

"The hand of a dead woman? Pish!"

"You have intimated enough, captain. I've been haunted by that handwriting on the skin of her horse, the word 'Vengeance.' I've seen it in my sleep, and but last night I sprang from the cot yonder, for me thought I saw the skeleton fingers writing the accursed word on my wall."

"And so you're going to fly, coward-like, from a shadow?"

"I'm going to save my neck."

Captain Dagger's eyes seemed to laugh derisively under the mask.

He said no more, but watched Gabriel walk to the door and place his bronzed hand on the latch.

"Good-night Gabriel," said he. "I wish you a successful flight from the ghost of Perdita."

The old yellow rascal looked over his shoulder, and the eyes of the two men met.

"I'm not the only one she's looking for," he said, with a hideous grin. "She wants the man called Don Ramon, and the chap known now as Captain Dagger, and—and—Adios, captain! May the saints defend you."

Old Gabriel touched his greasy hat: his eyes glittered for the last time, the door opened and closed, and Captain Dagger was the sole occupant of the shanty.

"The old liar!" he cried. "By Jove, I hope she'll choke him too!"

CHAPTER XIII.

MOSCO PICKS UP SOME NEWS.

SLOWLY the long hours of that long night were wearing away for Dirrell, the young captive of Centipede's Tribunal.

He did not try to sleep, but watched the play of light and shade on the walls of his shanty, and even longed for day, when he knew he must meet the court which would show no mercy.

He had learned that Juanita had been choked into a frame of mind bordering on insanity, and she would be in no shape to exonerate him from the dread charges preferred by Chita Con.

The outlook was dark enough.

"If Manuel were here he'd put a different face on affairs," said Dirrell to himself; but Manuel was away and he had the note which told him that he would have to fight his battle without his friend.

The night was near its close at last, and ere long day would break over hill and plain. Centipede for once seemed asleep. Even the man whose duty it was to guard the prisoner of the Tribunal was napping at his post.

At this hour there came from toward the mines a gliding shape which had the movements of the cat. It looked on every side with a pair of keen eyes, and did not halt until within a few steps of Dirrell's prison.

For several moments it stood there looking curiously at the figure that leaned against the logs, as if it were studying how best to surprise the guard; then it moved forward again, and was lost.

If Dirrell could have seen these movements he would have been mystified, though he might at last have guessed the identity of the crawler; but he was occupied with thoughts that weighed him down for the moment and saw nothing but the shadows on his wall.

By and by the man reappeared near the shanty and eyed the guard once more. Now, if Dirrell had used his eyes, he would have called the person an Indian, and a thought of Mosco the red juggler would have sprung uppermost in his mind.

Jaguar Juan's red friend had come back to Centipede, and the presence of the rough at the door of the shanty was too deep a problem for him.

He gave the sentry a good study before he stirred again.

"Somebody's caught," said the Indian in his own tongue. "The serpents of Centipede have some one in their coils, and Mosco must know who it is."

He went away again and brought up in front of a shanty near the edge of the camp, and, without rapping, lifted the wooden latch and entered.

He found the place dark enough, but moving across the room, he reached a cot where his hand touched a man's face, and the next moment some one sprang up with an oath.

"It is Mosco, Jose," said the Indian.

"Don't call me Jose," was the quick response. "I'm no dead man."

"Who has been touched by Mosco?"

"I'll show you," and the speaker struck a match and showed the Indian the face and figure of the man who had succeeded Jose as the proprietor of the whisky den.

"Pedro," smiled the Indian, surprised.

"Jose died suddenly and we put him away with Don Ramon. He fell over in his house dead—struck down without warning," continued the man of Centipede, wondering what had brought the Maricopa back to camp and especially to his particular cabin.

"Who is watched?" asked Mosco. "What has happened since I went away?"

The listener grinned.

"Oh, they've caught the fellow who strangled Juanita," he said.

"Who strangled the nabob's child?"

"Just so."

"Who is he?"

"The last importation—the young American who came to help Manuel work his mines."

Mosco said nothing, but his eyes got a curious light.

"Is Juanita, the Flower of the Mountain, dead?" he asked after a long pause.

"No, but I'd rather be if I were in her shoes. She's rattled here," and Pedro touched his forehead. "The infernal rascal choked her until she hasn't the mind of a child. She can't identify him to-morrow, but that'll not affect the result. They've got him where they've been wanting him a long time, and the sun will set upon another grave on the slope."

"Who saw him do the deed?" queried the Indian.

"No one saw that, but didn't Captain Chita come upon him while he was bending over his victim in the palace?"

"Captain Chita?"

Mosco seemed to speak the name half under his breath.

"Chita see him, eh?" he said.

"Of course he did, and that's enough to get a verdict of 'guilty' from the Tribunal."

"When will the prisoner be tried?"

"Judge Serafe has set the time at ten o'clock."

At mention of the name of the man who acted as judge-advocate of the dread court of Centipede, the Maricopa seemed to smile. He knew the character of the man—knew that he was Chita Con's right bower in any scheme the overseer concocted, and, if Pedro had looked keenly and in the right place, he might have seen the red hands of the Indian shut till the nails sunk into the dark palms.

"Mosco has bothered you, Pedro. He thought he was disturbing Jose, the little man of the ranch," said the red-skin. "He will go and let the white man's court deal with the prisoner."

"That's good sense," was the answer. "They won't need any testimony from Juanita; Captain Con's will be enough. It would hang a dozen men, and the one in the coils has no chance for his white alley. He wishes now, p'raps, that he hadn't come when Manuel sent for him."

"Where's Manuel?" asked the Indian.

"Oh, he's run away and left his pard to his fate. That's the way with some fellows; they're good enough in the sunshine, but let the shadows fall, then where are they?"

Mosco nodded slightly, as if he approved of Pedro's observation, and then bade the den's keeper good-night, though it should have been good-morning, and stole away.

Once more the gliding figure of the Indian went toward the cabin which held Dirrell, and eyed it as before. He seemed to be in a deep study, but he made no effort to attract the captive's attention, and shortly after disappeared.

Twenty minutes later he was in the mountain, mounted on a lithe-limbed horse, which carried him over the trail with remarkable swiftness.

He rode a long time, every now and then, after daylight had come, looking ahead and sweeping the landscape far below him. The animal did not seem to tire in the least. The Indian was not much of a burden, and he knew how to ride without fatiguing a horse.

At last Mosco halted and drew to one side of the trail. He passed one of his hands over his animal's mouth and waited.

Presently there came up the trail, which at that point appeared to bury itself in the earth, a man who rode a dark horse, well-blown. The keen eyes of the Indian juggler had detected him in the valley, and it was for him that he waited on the trail.

All at once Mosco, bending forward, threw up his hand, and the other, catching sight of it, reined in his horse and looked sharply at the Maricopa.

"What is it, Mosco?" he asked.

"The white snakes down there have some one in their coils," said the Indian, making a gesture over his shoulder toward Centipede.

"Some one for them to crush, eh?"

"Yes. They caught him last night; Pedro told me all about it. I went to Jose's shanty, pretending that I did not know Jose was 'on the slope,' and when I roused Pedro he thought I had come from the dead, from the way his little eyes looked. Captain Chita and the Tribunal hold the American in their clutches."

"Manuel?"

"No, the other one."

"What has he done?"

"Chita Con says it was his hand that choked Juanita into insanity."

The white man, who was Jaguar Juan, the ferret of Centipede, almost fell over his steed's neck.

"What! Has Juanita been visited by that mysterious hand?" he cried. "When did it happen?"

The horses were standing side by side, and Jaguar Juan was gripping the Indian's wrist.

Without betraying the least excitement, Mosco told all he knew about the dark cloud hanging over Dirrell. He did not neglect to repeat Pedro's charge that Manuel had deserted his friend.

"That is a lie, Mosco," said the detective, flushing. "Manuel has been away from Centipede longer than that. The chances are that he knows nothing of the trap into which his pard has fallen. I know Manuel—the last man to turn his back on a friend. The snakes of Centipede will say that, but it is a lie."

"Mosco knows it too," answered the red-skin. "But Manuel won't know about his friend until all is over."

"It is the old plot working," replied the Yellow Shadower. "There's a wheel within a wheel, Mosco. Captain Dagger and his old friend, Gabriel, may talk over old times, and Chita Con and Major Serafe play their hand, but you and I mustn't forget the trail we are on. This is the deepest game I ever saw. Mosco, my boy, you must take the trail alone for awhile."

The eyes of the young Indian seemed to glisten.

"The Masked Mystery is at work. He is stacking the cards for the greatest triumph of his black career. They tell us that Don Ramon is dead; but you know that the man who was strangled in the nabob's palace has a mutilated finger, and that—"

Mosco darted toward the speaker and clutched his arm.

"A horse!" cried the Indian. "Let's see who is on the trail."

The two men forced their steeds back among the bushes that fringed the trail and waited. The sharp ears of the Maricopa had heard what had not alarmed the detective.

They did not have to wait long before having Mosco's suspicions confirmed. In a little while the steady tread of a horse was heard, and Mosco's grip tightened when horse and rider came in view.

The new-comer was riding at his leisure, sitting in an easy attitude in the saddle, and seemingly without a suspicion that he was being watched by the two friends of the Southwest border.

In another moment Jaguar Juan and Mosco saw that they were in the presence of the famous Captain Dagger, the man whose face was never revealed—the bandit of the hills, and the one great mystery of the Arizona trails.

He wore his mask close, showing nothing but the dark skin of the throat beneath, and his hands rested idly on the brass-mounted pommel before him. He came to within ten feet of the breathless watchers, and Jaguar Juan felt the hand of his Indian ally tremble as it rested on his arm.

The Indian was eager to leap panther-like into the trail and look at the hidden face of the great bandit.

"Let him go," said the look which the detective gave his friend, and Captain Dagger passed unmolested toward Centipede, never dreaming of the espionage to which he had subjected himself.

"What do you think, Mosco?" asked Jaguar Juan.

"What has Mosco said since the death in the palace?" was the reply.

"Ah, you are right. The mask will fall before long. But I go to see the workings of the trap. Take the old trail, Mosco. Don't let the mysterious hand strangle you. A missing finger joint may prove a great deal sometimes."

The Indian nodded and picked up his steed's rein.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE YELLOW SHADOWER TAKES A HAND.

THERE stood in the darkest room of the nabob's palace a beautiful creature whose eyes had a look which any one could see was not her own.

This was Juanita the heiress of Don Ramon's millions, and she was alone.

The new day had come, and Dirrell was soon to be led into the presence of the Tribunal by which he had been judged, and from whose precincts he was expected to be sent to his doom. The vacant stare which the girl gave to the carpet beneath her feet told that she did not realize the true situation outside, that she was not aware of the coiling of the death serpent of Centipede around the young American whom she could clear of the infamous charges, if the Mysterious Hand had not, for the time, deprived her of reason.

She stood erect in the middle of the room, hearing nothing, and seeing naught but the play of sunlight and shadow across the carpet.

Though she was quite alone, a pair of eyes were secretly watching her. They had seen her enter the parlor and were regarding her with the care of the ferret, letting no movement of hers escape.

On every side was to be seen that display of wealth which Don Ramon had made without stint. The rich walls, the soft ceiling, and the magnificent furniture told of great riches, but the nabob had left it all, and Centipede was saying that Jaguar Juan, the Yellow Shadower, had waited a little too long.

Juanita at last moved across the room and quitted by a door on the right.

In an instant another door opened and there glided into the parlor a man who at first looked like Felipe, but who was an entirely different person. The spy followed the girl and vanished through the same door.

He tiptoed across the handsome hall beyond and saw her enter the room in which had been found the dead body of the Arizona nabob.

Here Juanita went to a desk which she unlocked and opened. Her movements were half-mechanical; there seemed no energy about them; she acted like a person walking in a sleep.

The tiger-footed man, who had a dark skin and a deep eye, stood at the door and watched the nabob's child.

He saw Juanita suddenly shut the lid of the desk, but he noticed that she had taken something therefrom which, to him, looked like a small dagger.

"I wonder what that means?" he asked himself. "She isn't going to kill herself in a crazy freak, I hope. Heavens! what a look she has just now!" and he drew back and looked afraid.

Five minutes later Juanita was at the window, looking out half vacantly at the houses before her. She did not seem to realize that she was a prisoner in her own house, as indeed she was, watched by a spy set after her by Chita Con, the overseer.

Once the spy saw her put her hand to her throat as if a recollection of her struggle with the Mysterious Hand had come back for a moment; but the illusion soon passed, and she continued to look down into the main street of Centipede.

If she could have seen what was going on at that very hour in another quarter, perhaps reason might have asserted itself and resumed the throne from which the grip of death had deposed it. If she could have left the nabob's palace and gone to the little square where the Tribunal held its sittings, she would have seen the minions of Chita Con and Major Serafe making ready for the farce they had been asked to play.

Under the boughs of the only respectable tree within the limits of the camp stood a rough table which had been taken from the gambling den for the occasion, and near by leaned several men who talked about the chances which Dirrell had for his life.

Presently the diminutive figure of Major Serafe made its appearance. The little man came forward with a smile on his dark face and playfully twisting the ends of his mustache, a habit of his when he was not altogether at his ease.

As he came forward he looked at a watch which he took from his sash and mutely noted the hour.

"I don't like it," muttered the major. "There's something about the outlook that don't just suit me. I can't say exactly what it is, but it's there all the same. Seems to me that somebody's going to interfere in the proceedings."

Soon afterward a man came down the street and with eyes fixed upon Major Serafe approached him and whispered a few words.

The head of the dread Tribunal started and looked toward the palace.

"By my head! I knew something was bound to happen," growled the major. "I can feel these things in the air," and he walked rapidly away, and disappeared beyond the door of a house where he was met by Chita Con who looked perplexed.

"Well?" began the major. "I got your message. When did he come back?"

"Some time between darkness and daylight," was the answer.

"But what right has he to interfere?"

"None whatever."

"He isn't American?"

"Of course he isn't," said Chita Con, with

lowered brow. "He says we should wait until Manuel returns, that we should also hold back for Juanita's evidence."

"Pish!" cried Major Serafe. "And you told him—"

"I sent for you," interrupted Chita Con. "I wanted to hear your opinion. I thought it best for us to put our heads together before we proceeded. Two heads are better than one, you know."

"Will he resist the court? Will he champion the cause of the man in the coil—champion it against the powers that be here?"

"I think he will."

"Well, he'll be one against many," smiled the major, giving the mustache another twist. "I've been aching for a chance to get at him. Ever since he set foot in these diggings he's been a shadow on our preserves. He pretended to be biding his time; he was playing detective against Don Ramon, but now that his occupation in that direction is gone he remains, and interferes with the workings of our court. Now is a good time to finish the shadow of the border."

A very devil looked from the eyes of the little Major of Centipede. He walked the floor in a nervous manner, and Chita Con watched him with an amused smile.

"Did he threaten?" suddenly asked Major Serafe, pausing in his movements and fixing his eyes on the tall figure of the plotting overseer.

"He used some language that was not to be misunderstood."

"He did, eh? Said he would do so and so if we went ahead and condemned the American?"

"It was a strong intimation," said Chita Con.

"What could he do?"

There was no immediate answer.

"He came back for a purpose," continued the overseer. "Somebody told him about the arrest—somebody who was here and got the news."

"It was that infernal Indian pard of his!" broke forth the major. "There's another stumbling block which must be knocked from our path before we can win the game. We've got to silence that red-skin who can juggle like Hermann. The two pards must die. I don't mince words, Captain Con."

"I don't want 'em minced. I realize the situation. We have to deal with the American now. The girl may recover her mind, and we don't want that event to take place while there's a chance to save the man in the grip of the Tribunal."

"Of course we don't. Let him get away and we'll never get him in our clutches any more. What did you tell Jaguar Juan, anyhow?"

"I asked for time. I told him that I would not answer him until I had consulted with my friends, who had the best interests of Centipede at heart."

"That was nice talk; but did it win?"

"It sent him off," said Chita Con. "It gave me a breathing spell, and now we must make up our minds."

"Whether to hang the man in our net or be bulldozed by one person?"

"Yes."

"Then, we go on with the trial," said the major. "This Yellow Shadower sha'n't brow-beat the whole camp. I don't care what sort of a reputation he has as a man of iron nerve. He has no right to champion the cause of the American. We must strike before Manuel comes back. Manuel is more dangerous than Jaguar Juan. He's got a deeper eye, and when he raises his six-shooter, he is very apt to shoot."

Chita Con listened to these words, but made no response. He did not like the idea of deferring to the man who had stalked into his presence and demanded that the trial of Dirrell the young miner be put off until Manuel returned or Juanita recovered her reason.

Jaguar Juan had done this in a moment of coolness. He had no particular friendship for Dirrell, so he told Chita Con; but he did not like to see a man condemned without a fair trial, and intimated rather strongly that he would not let such a thing be done.

The interview was a brief one, and the detective had departed feeling that he had scored his point by bearding the lion in his den.

"If he wins the first move, he'll win the second," suddenly cried Major Serafe. "We must balk him now. The court will open at the appointed hour."

He looked again at his watch.

"Detail one, two, five or ten men to catch him," he went on. "Give them secret instructions. Pick out our best fellows—men who have no scruples; we've got lots of 'em in camp. If Jaguar Juan attempts to balk the Tribunal, give the signal and let there be a dead man in his boots. You understand me, captain?"

"I understand, major," rejoined the big overseer.

"Are you afraid to act? Remember, we're playing for millions."

"It shall be done," exclaimed Chita Con. "There shall be no interference with the Tribunal of Centipede. Go back to your post. The picked men will be in the crowd. With Don Ramon dead, nobody shall balk the scheme. Go back, major."

The Judge-Advocate of Centipede walked from the cabin with a deep chuckle of delight.

He stepped lighter than usual, and when he reappeared at the tree he could not conceal the fact that he had won a victory.

He let twenty minutes pass away. He wanted Chita Con to have time to select the men he had in view, and when at last he saw several miners, the best shots in camp, join the crowd and give him a significant look he stepped into the little open space in front of the table and opened court.

"The Tribunal of Centipede City is declared open," cried the major. "Bring forth the prisoner!"

The high sheriff of the court left the scene and was soon noticed coming back, alone.

Chita Con and Major Serafe exchanged anxious glances.

"Where is the prisoner, sheriff?" asked the little man.

"He will not come, but sends word through his attorney that he isn't ready for trial," was the answer.

"By heaven! this is insolence," roared the major. "The Tribunal has never been insulted before. By his attorney, eh? In the devil's name who is his attorney?"

"He calls himself Jaguar Juan."

A laugh went over the crowd, but the faces of both Chita Con and Major Serafe darkened, and the little man, striking the table with his fist, cried out that the Tribunal would hang the attorney as well as his client.

"Well, get ready your noose," said some one in cool tones, and the major looking up saw the splendid figure of Jaguar Juan between him and the sun.

CHAPTER XV.

SECURING HIS VICTORY.

As a matter of course, there was a halt in the proceedings.

The sudden appearance of Jaguar Juan on the scene was enough to disconcert the major, and he turned all sorts of colors while he looked at the cool man who had bade him prepare the noose which was to strangle both attorney and client.

The Yellow Shadow of Centipede stood in full view of all, his commanding figure, always conspicuous, never more so than now.

There was the semblance of a smile on the detective's face.

"I don't know as you have a right to interfere," said the little major, finding his breath at last. "We did not send for you."

"No, but I am here," was the answer. "If there are to be two hangings, I thought it best for me to be on the ground."

That was all. He looked at Major Serafe again and then fell back a step, as if waiting for the next move on the part of the Tribunal.

"The court stands adjourned on call," spoke the major, sending the words through his teeth in a manner which told that he was still unconquered though baffled for the moment by the man who had come between him and his victim; and then without more ado he turned and walked away.

It was a ludicrous ending to what was to have been a tragic drama. The toughs of Centipede realized this, and all at once burst into a laugh which nettled the major till he colored though he tried to hide his chagrin.

Jaguar Juan looked after him with an amused smile, and then went back to the man he had left a few moments before.

"Well, what did you do?" asked Dirrell, who was anxiously waiting for him.

"I bluffed that little devil with the pointed mustache."

"The major, eh?"

"Major Serafe, as he calls himself."

"Where was he?"

"In the height of his glory—holding court in the Square. He had just listened to the report of his high sheriff and declared that the same rope should have the honor of strangling both lawyer and client, when I asked him to prepare the noose. The rascal turned all colors and didn't oblige me."

Dirrell could not help looking at the man who spoke thus with the greatest coolness. He admired the ferret of Arizona.

"You must not risk so much for me," said he. "You have work of your own. I am nothing to you. In fact—"

"There!" interposed the detective. "Say no more on this subject. We are men and should stand by each other when a lot of wolves harass us. I have a mission; you are right. But you do not know how it may affect your welfare."

Jaguar Juan walked to the little window and looked out. Dirrell watched him closely. He thought he noticed a desire on the detective's part to say more, but something seemed to hold him back.

"The Tribunal has adjourned on call," said the detective, coming toward him. "It is liable to come together again at any time. Don't think that you are out of danger. It is only a breathing-spell. I've only pushed the dogs off for a while—that's all."

"And I thank you for that," said Dirrell.

"It is deep and damnable—this conspiracy, I mean," the ferret went on, without noticing the young miner's remark. "The two plotters will

put their heads together for another play. In some manner you've crossed their path."

Dirrell looked amazed.

"Think. Go back over your life. Examine it since your arrival in camp. Follow your career step by step. What have you done to Chita Con?"

"Nothing," answered the American promptly.

"What to Major Serafe?"

"Nothing."

"These men don't hate for nothing—they have some end in view. You stand between them and success."

"They don't like Americans."

"That is true, but that don't cover their animosity. There is something under that yet."

Jaguar Juan came closer to the miner until they stood face to face with hardly any space between them.

"Did you ever make love to Juanita?"

The question struck Dirrell so forcibly that for a moment he was staggered, then the ludicrousness of the query as suddenly confronted him, and he smiled.

"Why, we have never exchanged a word," he said. "What! I make love to the nabob heir-ess? It cannot be that."

"Chita Con may look ahead," was the reply.

"He wants—well, you know what he wants. He is clearing the way, and he thinks you are in it. He has the major to help him; the two are into the game for the Don's millions. It is a conspiracy for the biggest fortune this side of the Mississippi."

"I think I see through one of the mysteries of Centipede. Don Ramon is dead—out of the conspirators' way. They tell me that you are on the trail."

"I am. There are some things, apparently secrets, which I believe I can confide to you. I am the sworn ferret of the young girl whose mind has been darkened by a merciless hand; but, at the same time, I am a tracker on my own account. If I had not encountered Juanita in the palace after Don Ramon's murder I would have taken the trail all the same. I swore on the cross for a purpose. I shall keep my oath. This is but a diversion. By the living God, Dirrell, I shall unravel this death mystery, and the hand that killed the man in the nabob's house shall be found out. Now let us separate for the present. Forget not that you are still in the meshes of the net of doom. I have stepped between you and the Tribunal—nothing more."

"And is that nothing?" cried Dirrell, springing forward. "The time will come when this act of yours will be remembered in a substantial manner. When Manuel comes back—"

Jaguar Juan's sudden withdrawal toward the door broke the young miner's sentence.

"We'll meet again," said the detective. "Keep a stiff upper lip as they say in some places. The shadow of conspiracy is lengthening. The cards apparently in the hands of your foes."

"I won't let them triumph if I can prevent. The Tribunal shall not succeed without a struggle."

Five minutes later the ferret of Centipede was gone, and Dirrell was reflecting on the events of the last few hours alone, with the main thoroughfare of the gold camp stretching away from his window.

"That man is worth his weight in gold," said he to himself, thinking of Jaguar Juan. "He has told me some strange things and more are yet to be told. Does Chita Con really think that I have thought of playing a game of love for Don Ramon's millions? Can Major Serafe put such an idea in his head?"

It was a puzzle which the young American had to confess his inability to solve, and he gave it up and returned to other things. He saw the sun creep higher and higher up the sky until it stood at its meridian, and more than once he wondered what had become of the Yellow Shadow. Had he left the camp, and was he (Dirrell) once more at the mercy of the Tribunal?

Jaguar Juan had left the gold camp, but he had performed, before leaving, an act of which the marked American knew nothing.

Captain Con, swearing mad over the outcome of the trial, was alone in his shanty when the doorway was suddenly darkened, and he beheld before him the form of the yellow ferret.

In another instant the two men stood face to face.

"I'm going way for a spell," said the detective, speaking first, with his eyes riveted upon the overseer. "I am liable to come back at any time. The young man accused of the strangling of Juanita must not be tried with the consent of his legal adviser."

Chita Con seemed to smile at the last two words.

"I have called to say this," continued the detective. "The guilt of the accused has not been proved. The evidence of a certain girl, now in no condition of mind to testify, should be had—"

"Do you mean Juanita?" broke forth the overseer, his face growing crimson under one of his mad flushes.

"I mean the nabob's child."

"She may never recover."

"Then, how can you condemn the prisoner? What did you see, Captain Con?"

"I came upon him in the palace. I saw him bending over Juanita in the hall, and she was totally unconscious."

The Yellow Detective bent forward and looked at the dark hand resting on the edge of the table.

"You were in the house at the same time, perhaps," said he. "That's a nice hand of yours, Captain Con. It used to be famous for its grip and—"

The overseer of the nabob's mines fell back with a devil's glare in his eyes.

"What do you insinuate now?" he cried. "By heavens! you carry your friendship pretty far."

"Don't get petulant, captain," smiled the detective. "We can talk without showing our teeth; at least I can. I was saying that you had a pretty hand, silken and soft, and noted for its strength."

Chita Con dropped the exposed hand below the table and looked up at the cool ferret.

"You mean something by such talk," growled he. "You are insinuating that I strangled Juanita."

"By no means," answered Jaguar Juan. "Do you think I'd put such a crime upon you? Why bless you, man, Juanita would be the last person you would strangle. There are other hands in this world besides yours and Dirrell's. A good many years ago, when you were not a citizen of Centipede, and when there was no Centipede with its mysteries and mines, that hand of yours was famous for several things."

Captain Con bit his lip half through.

"Curse you, Jaguar Juan, what are you driving at, anyhow?" he exclaimed.

The detective did not lose his temper.

"Since I happen to know for what that silken hand of yours was famous before the palmy days of Centipede," said he, and his dark and handsome face came closer to Chita Con's, "I demand that the Tribunal, as regards Dirrell's case, stand adjourned forever."

In an instant the face of the overseer grew darker than ever. A spasm of rage seemed to shake his frame, and he would have sprung erect if the hand of Jaguar Juan had not at that moment closed on his wrist.

"Don't get excited. Keep cool," said he. "I know your past like a book well read. You forget that I've made it a duty to know something about all parties connected with this game for gold. That's a nice hand, I say. It's helped you out of several tight places. Let the Tribunal sit on the American's case and it will fail to help you out of the results. You are still the Vulture King, though you play here a game of darkness with your old crown laid aside. I know you, Captain Con. I can tell you as much about your past as you could tell yourself. I know about that crime which, in your mind, is hidden beneath the sands of the Great Waste. I know why it was committed. Touch that boy if you dare! Summon him before the Tribunal of Centipede, and I will hand you over to the eagles of border vengeance. You seem secure here, but you don't smile. I am the avenger of crime! I am more than Jaguar Juan, the ferret! Look me in the eye! Do you know me now? Why didn't you see it before?"

There was no answer. The face of the plotter of Centipede was a white blank. Jaguar Juan bent still closer.

"If you dare! You know what I can do!" said he, and was gone.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WOMAN IN THE CORNER.

THERE stood at the door of a shanty in a cacti-dotted valley a magnificent-looking woman.

She was quite alone, and her eyes had the snap of eagerness. In one hand she carried a short whip, which seemed to tell that she had lately been in the saddle, as indeed she had, for she had just left a horse in a clump of bushes not far off, and had approached the cabin with a good deal of stealth.

The sun had set and there were many shadows about the shanty.

She looked up at the structure and seemed to wonder what sort of greeting she would receive when she should pull the dirty latch-string hanging along the door.

At last she caught the string and gave it a sharp jerk. There was no response whatever.

"Not at home, eh?" exclaimed the caller, a smile appearing on her face. "Did you know I was coming, you old desert lizard? Have you been on the lookout for me?"

She jerked the string harder than before, but was not rewarded for her pains. Then she took hold of the latch and gave the door a good push. The portal flew open, and she was inside.

"The nest is empty," she said. "The vulture has flown—gone off in search of some bloated carcass, perhaps. Why didn't you wait for me, Gabriel? I was bound to come some time—it was but a question of a few years. I hadn't forgotten you—no, I could not do that. Why, the last face I saw that awful day was yours, and you believe that I fell a prey to the scavengers of the waste."

She laughed at her own language and fell to examining the interior of the cabin. The dreary

place contained nothing worth looking at. The home of a wretch like old Gabriel, the desert hawk, could not be expected by any one who knew him to be very fine in the way of appointments and the caller did not find anything amiss.

She had come too late to see the man whose interview with Captain Dagger had exiled him from home. If she had come a few hours sooner she might have found both men there and there might have been an exciting scene.

"No, I haven't forgotten you," said the beauty again, as if she liked to recur to the rascal who had dwelt in the shanty for years. "I haven't had any use for you since until now and I would like to see you for a few minutes."

She stopped rather abruptly, for a sound had grated harshly upon her ear and she turned to the door which she had left half-way open.

The next moment there came up to the threshold a man at sight of whom the woman shrunk into the darkest corner of the cabin, where she huddled the rough wall while she eyed the newcomer as though her eyes would pop from her head.

The man came inside. He was tall and dark, was dressed like a mountain tough, with his pantaloons stuck into the tops of his high boots, had long hair which had not seen a comb for months, and hands as dirty as the ground he trod.

"Gone, hey?" exclaimed this fellow, looking round the cramped apartment, but missing the woman in the corner. "I thought he'd take a notion to go back to the desert. This life wasn't just the kind old Gabriel hankered after. Nothing suited him as well as robbing people and he knows how to do that to perfection. I'd like to know if he an' Cap'n Dagger made a bargain, and if that's why he vamoosed the ranch. The cap'n came rather unexpectedly—at least, that's the way it looked to me—and Gabriel rode away alone on the boss he's kept all this time for some purpose like the present one."

The woman in the dark corner started at these words. She seemed on the eve of springing out and confronting the man who was talking aloud to himself; but she kept her place in hopes that he would reveal more.

But instead of continuing, he went over into the corner opposite her and dropped upon his knees.

"I saw him down in this corner once," she heard him say. "He appeared to have something buried here. I'll just see if it was so," and he fell to digging up the dirt with his long fingers.

The silent woman bent forward with eagerness almost devouring her. She had unconsciously drawn a dagger, but she suddenly put it up and looked with a smile at her hands as if they were better than the long blade.

The man dug valiantly for several minutes, and was about to give up in disgust when he uttered a cry which drew the watcher closer to him.

"That's something hyer!" he cried, "I was about to give up the job when my hand struck it. If it's money, Gabriel, I'll pay you back some time."

He laughed and stood up, holding in his hand a packet which looked like something done up in oiled silk. It wasn't much larger than his hand, and he bent toward the door where the starlight lay to see what he had found.

The woman in the corner now took a step forward and watched him like a hawk.

"Mebbe Gabriel left a candle somewhere," suddenly said the thief, turning back into the shanty. "It's dark enough for a light, anyhow, and I'm dying to see what I've found."

His sharp eyes pounced upon a dirty lamp on a shelf and the next minute he had lit it and was unwrapping his find on the table over which he leaned with burning eyes.

If he had looked behind him he would have sprung back with a cry, for the woman had left her corner once more and stood almost over him with her face transformed into the face of a demon—the eyes blazed so. Moreover, the hands were half closed, and very close to his dark neck—close enough to shut around it at a moment's notice.

The packet was tied with a tough string, well knotted, and he had to cut it with his knife, which he laid on the table after the operation.

"It don't feel much like coin," he said, opening the find. "But it was valuable enough to bury, and that makes me anxious to see what's in the pack."

How the eyes looking over his shoulder regarded his every movement now; how they watched his dark fingers, and how the soft hand came up and rested in mid-air ready to dart down upon the prize like an eagle!

It took the desperado some time to open the packet, but at last the task was accomplished, and his eyes beheld something which surprised and disappointed him.

"It's nothing but a locket!" he cried, holding up a small gold locket. "This is what old Gabriel, the desert thief, hid the night I saw him in the corner. Why hide such a simple thing as this? It's not worth much, that's a fact, but this locket may have a history, and Gabriel was afraid to trade it off."

He opened it with some effort and bent over the lamp to see the face pictured in the oval frame of gold. The woman behind him followed his example like a ghost or his second shadow.

"I'll just take it with me," said the man. "I can stake it down at Taos, and maybe it'll bring back my lost luck. They'll allow me something for it at Samson's, and if they wonder where I got it I'll say I picked it up in an old camp."

The last word still quivered on the speaker's lips when there came down over his shoulder something that made him start.

He fell back with a cry pulling the locket after him, but his progress was arrested by the hand which had closed on his wrist.

He was in the grasp of the Unknown.

"Give it to me for it is mine!" said the woman sternly, at the same time fixing her eyes upon the locket.

"Yours? In the name of the holy dead, who are you?"

"Never mind that. Surrender the prize in your hand! It is mine, I say, and woe to the man who tries to keep what is mine."

The sallow tough held to the locket and looked at her with eyes dilated with wonder.

"Stand back a pace so I kin see your face better," he said at last, recovering from his fright.

The beautiful Unknown accommodated him, and standing in the full light of the lamp, but still gripping his wrist, let him study her face to his heart's content.

"You've got her face, by heavens! you have," said he, "but she died years ago."

"Who died then?" she asked with a smile.

"It's a long story and if you ain't that woman I won't bother you with the yarn—"

"If I were that woman, what?"

"You'd know the story, anyhow," grinned the man.

"But I'll take my property. I want the prize you stole from the biggest thief that ever rode the desert."

"From old Gabriel, eh? That's right; you've got him down fine. So this is yours?"

He looked at the locket.

"It is mine," said the woman.

"When did old Gabriel rob you?"

"When I could not help myself; you may be sure of that. He had me at the mercy of his thieving fingers. Some time I'll get him at the mercy of my avenging ones. But the locket—I want it."

"What will you give for it?"

"For my own property?" cried the woman.

"Do you want me to buy my own?"

"If I hadn't found it, you wouldn't have known it was here," he retorted. "I think I ought to have something for finding it."

"How much?"

"A hundred, anyhow."

"A hundred to lose at Samson's?" she smiled.

"I haven't got a dollar with which to buy back that which was taken from me when I was helpless and in the shadow of death."

"Then mebbe I kin find a better market."

"You never shall. The only market for that locket is here."

The next instant the hand which until now had encircled his wrist flew suddenly at his throat, and before he knew it he was going toward the wall, pushed thither by a power which he would never have thought his fair assailant possessed.

He gripped the locket tighter than ever; he swore a mad oath that if force was to be employed she should never get the prize; but just then the hand at his throat was reinforced by its mate, and the robber felt them sink toward his windpipe with a power which he could not break.

He was borne back to the logs; he felt their rough bark at his back, and the soft fingers of the Unknown were gripping his waist like a vise of steel. What a strength lay in those dark hands whose touch was as soft as the hands of a babe!

"It is mine!" she cried. "I need that locket on the trail of vengeance. It will help to bring me justice and to punish as man has never punished the guilty. I will have it or your life. There's death in my hands. They've choked before; they'll kill you if you don't surrender the prize you've found."

The man against the wall did not seem to hear more than half of these words. His black eyes were bulging from his head; he had lost all power to overcome the hands at his throat, and he no longer breathed.

All at once the woman fell back. She took her hands away and her victim dropped to the ground. The next moment she bent over him and opened one of his hands, then sprung up with a cry of victory holding aloft the prize battled for.

The man at her feet did not move.

She stooped again and felt his pulse.

"It was his own fault," she said, and smiled.

CHAPTER XVII.

FOUND.

"Of course it was his own fault," repeated the Unknown when she came back to the horse she had left in the bushes near the shanty where she had robbed the robber. "I don't know his name, but never mind; I can't stop for such things.

He should have given up the locket without a fight. He was a fool to resist. I would have given my life for what I won. If I had found Gabriel there it would have been the same."

She rode away towards the southwest, now and then pressing her hand against her bosom, as if to assure herself that the locket was still where she had placed it, and at last, urging the horse into a run, she sped over the ground as if riding for life. The darkness of night came on, but did not interfere with her mad gallop.

"He acknowledged that I looked like some one who is supposed to be dead," suddenly laughed the Unknown. "Other people think the same and no wonder. I am dead to one-half the world—not only dead, but devoured by the winged scourges of the desert. What would old Gabriel have thought if he could have seen me? I fancy that the old rascal's hair would have stood on end and his eyes have popped from his evil head. But the time is coming when we will try him. Though you've run away, Gabriel, you haven't escaped. Nobody escapes me."

After awhile the strange woman disappeared among the mountains, and the stars shone no longer on her in the valley. By and by she came out from among the hills and rode into a small town which contained some twenty cabins.

"I have a home here if nowhere else," she said, riding up to one of the shanties and dismounting at the door. "I am simply Inez here. I wish I could die among these miners. If I can end my trail to my liking, I'll come back here and do it. No, I won't, either. I don't want to die thus. My blood would dry up here. I couldn't be strangling any one. Ha, ha, my hands would forget what they were made for!"

She let the lines lie over the arched neck of her horse and went to the door, which she opened without knocking. In a minute she came out again and led the horse to a small stable, where she took off the equipments and returned to the cabin.

"Ah, that is the boy," she exclaimed, as a footstep greeted her, and before the last word had ceased to sound she beheld a figure in the doorway, and when it had come forward, a boy stood in the room. He was a typical boy of the Southwest border, but half-dressed, with a dark face and darker eyes, which seemed glad to see the woman home again.

The Unknown had lit the lamp, and its rays were chasing away the gloom which had greeted her. The boy, who was not past sixteen, crept forward and looked inquiringly into her face.

"Who's been here, Sancho?" asked the woman, pulling the boy up to the table.

"Nobody's inquired for you," was the reply.

"But you've seen some one?"

"I saw him to-night," answered the youth.

"You saw whom? Tell me, Sancho. When did he come, what did he do, and where is he now?"

"He came about two hours ago. He walked into Juan's den and took a drink; then he watched the boys while he puffed one of Juan's bad cheroots and finally walked out."

"You followed him?"

"I did."

"Well?"

"He went down to the creek near the big rock where he had left his horse. I saw his every movement, for the moment I noticed him in Juan's den, I thought he was up to something, and that's why I followed him so eagerly."

"Did you ever see the man before, Sancho?"

"I never did; but couldn't I see that he had something on his mind, and that he wanted to find out something? He looked like a person who was trying to make himself scarce in a certain neighborhood, for he was nervous-like all the time he stayed in Juan's place, and when the boys got to looking at him pretty hard, he went away."

"What did he do when he reached the rock? Surely, you didn't let your vigilance slack there?"

"Of course I didn't," was the prompt reply. "He led his horse down the trail, muttering something to himself, and I tried to catch what it was, but with very poor success."

"But you heard a few words?"

"Very few. He seemed to be talking about some one who he had supposed was dead, but who was not as dead, as he thought. He mentioned no names, but he said that a lot of vultures and a summer sun shining on a desert ought to kill a man of iron, let alone a delicate woman."

"Did the old rascal say that, Sancho?" cried the Unknown.

"Who told you he was an old rascal?" asked the boy, surprised.

"I'm a good guesser," smiled the woman. "Yes, he was an old man, and he talked about the sun and the vultures. I thought he would have such things on his mind. It is the most natural thing in the world."

"I followed him down the trail until he disappeared. I didn't want to follow him all night, and so I came back just in time to find you here."

"I thank you, Sancho," said the woman, squeezing the boy's hand. "One of these days I will pay you for playing watch-dog for me. The old sinner was here—in Cactus City. I wish I had been at home. No, if I had I would not have won the victory elsewhere."

She saw the boy looking at her with much curiosity, as if her last remark needed a solution; but she did not explain. She would not tell Sancho about the man lying dead with a blackened face in a lonely little cabin.

Some time later the woman dismissed the boy and stole from the hut. She crossed the space between the edge of the town and the foothills, and soon stood on the very spot which Sancho had described to her.

"He was here," she said, kneeling down and looking at some faint impressions on the ground. "He stumbled upon my retreat, for old Gabriel—the desert robber—did not know I lived here. He is a fugitive, for nothing but tidings of my continued existence would have forced him from his hidden home. Who told him? Who let out the secret? Did Captain Dagger, the man of many names and crimes, tell him that the vultures and the sun were more merciful than they? Ah, Captain Dagger, I will turn upon you ere long. The plum is ripening and I will soon shake it down."

She looked down the trail, as if she would find in it the man who had been tracked to the spot by Sancho, her boy spy.

"I'll go down to the cross-trails. The moonlight will be there and I may see which road he took."

She left the big rock and walked through shadow and moonlight to a place where the trail was crossed by another, and there she knelt to examine some marks in the soft earth.

"He went west from here," said she, speaking aloud. "The old Ishmaelite who deserves a thousand deaths took the long trail. He's flying from a shadow. He has shut up his shanty among the cacti and runs from a woman he robbed when he thought her dead with the vultures swooping to drink her blood. I must not let this chance pass. He might get away if he perseveres. The border line isn't far off. No, I break my oath if I let old Gabriel slip through my fingers."

She went back to the little town, seeing no living soul but Sancho, who waited for her return.

"My horse," said the Unknown. "Be quick, Sancho."

The boy darted off without a word, though he wondered what had transpired to bring out that order, and the woman entered the cabin.

"Something tells me that I am going off to stirring events, that I shall find and finish both of them before I come back. I know the dangers of this hunt. I know that the man called Jaguar Juan will baffle me if he can. He will be assisted by his red friend, Mosco. Ah, we shall have a struggle—I feel it; but I must triumph. For the sake of the dead whom I am avenging—for the sake of the living I must use these fatal hands of mine. They must find and kill. I have won a point in the game; I have recovered the prize for which Gabriel followed me over miles of burning sand. I have that safe. Now I must find the robber, and then—Don Ramon, the dead."

She was partly interrupted by the reappearance of the boy and the horse. The woman came out with a smile on her handsome face, and stooping suddenly, kissed the dark and dirty face of Sancho, then mounted the horse, which recognized her with a joyous whinny, and was off.

"The blessings of Heaven go with the lady," said Sancho, devoutly crossing himself. "I'd like to know why she goes so soon, but she must keep her secrets, which is right. I think she would not have gone away if I had not made any report." And he watched her until she was no longer to be seen.

The strange woman rode to the cross-trails and then took the one leading westward. She kept on this for some miles, stooping every now and then over the saddle to note the impressions of hoof-tracks in the ground. These seemed to tell her that she was on the right track, and rising from the inspection, she would touch her steed with the spurs and send him swiftly down the road.

She was a tireless tracker.

Several hours passed before the woman drew rein. She had ridden over a rough country and had debouched into a beautiful valley where the grass was soft, and across which came the odor of wild flowers.

Into the heart of this valley, which was quite small, rode the mysterious trailer. She reached a spot where the bushes grew thick, and then let her horse crop the rich foliage while she looked around.

All at once she was startled by a sound which sent her hand toward her black belt, but the next second she was confronted by a man who had stepped suddenly into view.

"Woman, ghost or demon," cried the voice, "don't lift a hand. I have the death drop on you, and I'm in the frame of mind to touch the trigger at a very slight move by you. Are you looking for me?"

The Unknown leaned forward in spite of herself. She saw the tall form that stood erect with a cocked Winchester at a "ready," and with a glaring eye near the stock. She saw, too, the hatchet-like face of the owner of that eye, and knew at a glance that she had found old Gabriel, the runaway.

"I heard you war flesh an' blood yet, an' not bones or spirit," continued the fugitive. "I reckon you're after me for what's passed. I don't want to go the long road just yet, especially not by a hand like yours. What do you want?"

The occupant of the saddle covered the speaker with her right hand.

"I am Perdita, the woman robbed by you on the desert when you thought the sun had burned my blood up, and when the vultures were waiting for you to get away from me. I am the woman who wants the blood of more than one man. I am the avenger of innocent blood, the sworn tracker of Don Ramon, the nabob—"

"You'll have to track him through Satan's dominions, then," interrupted old Gabriel. "He was found dead in his gilded palace in Centipede, strangled by an unknown hand. I guess you're too late, unless it war your hand that blackened the nabob's face."

"You lie!" cried the woman. "You know you lie, but that is nothing for a wretch like you. I could tell you something, but I will not."

"I don't want to hear it. I won't be trailed by a woman who can beat death and a thousand vultures. I am going to rid my trail of you, and then I'll have peace. I know who you are, and why you hated Don Ramon, but I don't blame you for that. I want to have a clear trail myself. You have found old Gabriel, but to die—this time for certain!"

There was no response by the Unknown, and the following moment the rifle spoke in sharp tones, and there lay a body at the feet of the black horse.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE GRIP OF A RED HAND.

OLD GABRIEL stood in his tracks for a moment after firing the shot, and then walked up to his victim. He saw that the Unknown had fallen on her face and that she lay quite still, her head against one of the fore feet of her steed.

A smile brightened for an instant the hard face of the border reprobate.

"Dead enough this time," said he. "I guess she won't bother me any more. Hated Don Ramon, didn't she? Well I don't blame her. She hated me, too, and I reckon she had a right to have a bad opinion of old Gabriel. This time the vultures will have a meal for certain. Good-by, Perdita. You won't get to the end of your vengeance trail as you called it, and I'm devilish glad you won't. My neck feels easier now," and he put his hand up to his throat. "She had hands like silk, but, heavens! they knew how to choke!"

He seized the bridle of the woman's horse, and, mounting his own, led the animal away.

"I wouldn't rob her for the world—that is, I wouldn't take anything from her person. I did that once before and evil came of it. She can keep all she's got. Because I robbed her the other time, she came to life, but I won't coax her back now."

He went down the valley through the starlight, which showed the cacti clumps with great distinctness, and looked back every now and then, as if he more than half-expected to see his victim on his trail again.

"I guess the cap'n would like to hear of this, but I won't hunt him up to tell him," he said to himself. "I won't turn out of my way to let him know that she is dead for certain. He'll find out one of these days if Jaguar Juan or his Indian pard don't interfere. The Yellow Shadow is a sticker, and won't give up the trail. I wonder if he has discovered whose hand did the deed in Don Ramon's palace. He's sworn to find out; he's become Juanita's tracker, and I don't want him to look after me, as he might do if he knew a thing or two."

Gabriel shrugged his shoulders and looked back for the last time ere he quitted the valley.

"It's good-by forever this time," he went on, waving his hand toward the woman he had left in the starlight. "I'm out of the game at last. No fears of dead women trailing old Gabriel any longer. Ha, ha! Satan helped his own tonight, for which he has my thanks," and the rascal laughed as he touched his hat, and bowed to an imaginary personage.

Beyond the valley he urged his horse into a gallop, and, with Perdita's steed to keep him company, went over the ground at good speed.

"This place will do," said the old fellow, drawing rein in a dark-looking cut between two mountains. "I can't have property of this kind in my possession, for the boss is known all over Arizona."

He drew his knife and leaned toward the horse he led. Grasping the bridle firmly, he looked at the glossy neck of the black animal, and then plunged the shining blade into a vital place.

The horse reared savagely, but Gabriel did not

relinquish his hold. Once more he stabbed, the warm blood gushing out in a horrid stream, while he grinned like a devil over his murderous work. At last the horse sunk to the ground, and after a few spasms of pain lay still.

Old Gabriel got down, and stripping off the equipments, carried them to a clump of bushes and threw them in. Having done this, he came back to his brute victim, and mounted his own steed once more, rid at last of some troublesome proof.

Then he disappeared by plunging into the shadows of the mountain, and striking fire from the rocks which now and then cropped out in the trail.

"Take old Gabriel for a fool and get duped!" he laughed. "She won't try it again at any rate."

All through the night that man rode from the scene of his infamy. Every now and then he would break out into laughs of victory, and would rub his throat, as if he felt that it had escaped a deserved grip by the merciless silken hands of the Unknown.

He pulled up at last before a little tumble-down hut among the hills. It was evident that he had come upon the place without warning, for he eyed the shanty with great curiosity, and finally dismounted and approached it, revolver in hand. But it was empty; there was nothing about it to rouse his fears or disturb his guilty soul.

Old Gabriel concluded to try the virtues of a sleep, and in a little while he was inside with his horse, and was fast asleep.

He heard nothing, but his horse did. The animal soon began to snuff the air and appear uneasy. He had sniffed the presence of something on the outside, and finding his master in the dark, he pulled at his sleeve until Gabriel sat up and listened, the six-shooter in his grip.

The tumble-down door was half-way open, and the morning starlight was falling inside. Gabriel felt the presence of something he could not see and the longer he thought the uneasier he grew.

"My God, is she alive again?" he gasped. "Has that woman more lives than a cat? I shot her fair. I saw the blood on her face and the track of the ball. I looked close so that there could be no mistake, and if she is out there—"

His teeth actually chattered, and when he got up and tried to stand he tottered and almost fell at the door.

The horse was still making signs of fright. Old Gabriel took hold of the bit to quiet him, and at any minute he expected to see the avenging ghost of Perdita in the doorway.

At last there came to the door a shadow from which the old reprobate shrunk in mortal terror. He saw there the unmistakable figure of an Indian.

It was inside in an instant, but its feet gave out no sound and the dark-faced rascal would not have bet that it was flesh and blood.

"Drop your gun," said a voice at which he started. "Mosco has the eyes of the night-hawk and he sees the yellow vulture of the desert."

At the same time the Indian stepped forward, and in a moment Gabriel felt the grip of the softest hand he had ever come in contact with.

"Come into the starlight," said his captor, dragging him out. "Mosco wants to look at you."

"Well, here I am," answered Gabriel with an attempt at a laugh. "Have I gained any beauty since you saw me last? I never was much of a seraph, and I guess I'm no prettier now."

Mosco, Jaguar Juan's red pard, said nothing, but, still retaining his grip on the man he had caught, held him at arm's length and studied him closely.

"What do you want with me?" resumed Gabriel, feeling some boldness coming to his assistance. "I've never crossed your path, never put a straw in your way."

"I want you to talk," said the young Indian.

"Well, fire away."

Once more Mosco looked his victim over from head to foot.

"I wonder what that red devil is going to strike me with?" he thought. "He'll find me a reg'lar clam when it comes to answering questions I don't like," and then he waited for the beginning of the queries.

"Well, Gabriel, where's Captain Dagger?" suddenly asked Mosco.

The old scamp fell back and looked innocent. "Do you think I am in league with that masked fellow?" he cried.

"By Jove! you don't seem to think I have any respect for my reputation."

The Indian's eyes twinkled merrily.

"You've seen Captain Dagger lately," he said. "Come, don't lie to Mosco. He was with you. When he went away you took your horse and rode off. Did you come back and kill the man lying in your shanty?"

"A dead man in my old trap?" ejaculated Gabriel.

"Mosco has spoken. Did you come back and kill him?"

"Before my Master, I did not! Who is he?"

"A strange man."

"Mebbe he came there and just died."
 "He was choked to death. I saw the marks of fingers at his throat."
 "Mebbe she did it."

In a moment old Gabriel regretted his hasty words, but they were out, and Mosco had noticed them.

"Who is she?" he asked, but the rascal attempted to repair his work.

"What did I say? My head's been out of fix for some days. I'm getting old and flighty. I'm not the Gabriel I used to be."

"When you rode the desert looking for all the world like a vulture, robbing the victims of others—fleecing the half-dead and the helpless?" grinned the red juggler. "Don't lie to Mosco. You haven't told me where Captain Dagger is, but we'll let that pass."

Gabriel was willing.

"Now, where is Don Ramon?"

The old vulture fell back, laughing, but the face of the red-skin was as immobile as the face of a statue. His eyes were riveted upon his prisoner, and Gabriel soon discovered that he could not laugh him from the point.

"You ought to know where Don Ramon is," he exclaimed. "The Nabob of Centipede is well known. I'm not his keeper. If he is alive he lives in the palace he built among his mines; if dead, you'll find him in the mountain graveyard."

"No lies," said the Indian, in the same sternness that characterized his former warnings, and the right red hand dropped upon Gabriel's shoulder, and closed there with a softness which made him shudder. "Answer, Mosco: Where is Don Ramon?"

"Ask Felipe."

"Mosco asks the man who knows as much as Felipe," was the quick rejoinder. "Will you tell him?"

"Don Ramon is dead!"

"Where's your cross, Gabriel?"

The old villain looked at Mosco, but did not reply.

"Will you swear by it that Don Ramon is dead?" he went on. "Will you swear by the cross of your religion that you have not seen the Nabob of Centipede within the last few hours?"

"In the flesh?" stammered Gabriel.

"In the flesh. Give me your hand, your left one—there. This finger is all right—not a joint missing. When did Don Ramon lose the first joint of the little finger of his left hand?"

Old Gabriel started.

"He never lost it," he cried.

A smile of triumph passed over the dark face of the Indian.

"Then, when you say that Don Ramon is dead you tell one of your many lies," said he. "The man found strangled in Don Ramon's chair in the palace had a joint missing. He looked like Don Ramon. Juanita called him father and shed tears over his grave. He wore Don Ramon's clothes; he was sitting at Don Ramon's desk when found dead—strangled, mind you, Gabriel. You tell me that Don Ramon's hands were perfect. Now, don't try to take back your words, for for once you told the truth. Who was found dead in the palace?"

The look of the old rascal had become a stare.

"You know, you liar of the desert," cried Mosco, and the hand tightened on Gabriel's shoulder. "You are, in part, Don Ramon's secret keeper. I don't charge you with having a hand in the mysterious death in the nabob's house, but you know who died there. The story of the missing finger-joint is known to you. More than this, you know who killed that man. Don't send us to Felipe. Open your mouth and tell Mosco the solid truth. If you won't, I'll turn you over to the vengeance of the Woman with the Silken Hand."

Old Gabriel laughed. The Woman with the Silken Hand! He knew what had become of her, and he had nothing to fear.

CHAPTER XIX.

A RED TIGER-CAT.

"YOU'LL turn me over to the strangler with the soft hand, will you?" exclaimed old Gabriel, showing his teeth. "I've half a notion to tell you to go ahead. I don't fear her in the least. She couldn't hurt a babe."

Mosco looked at him most curiously. It was evident that the border reprobate spoke in riddles. The Indian could not imagine why he should treat lightly the threat to hand him over to the mysterious woman whom he had feared as one fears the shadow of death and from whom he had fled as from a pestilence.

The Maricopa did not know of the tragedy of the valley.

"If you don't fear her," said the Indian at last, "Mosco can punish you here. Will you speak now, yellow fox? Who was found dead in Don Ramon's palace?"

The lips of the desert thief came together with an emphasis which instantly caught the red-skin's eye.

"Fool!" cried Mosco. "The hand of the Maricopa is as soft and deadly as the hand of the huntress. It can strangle as well as hers," and the next moment it was at Gabriel's throat proving his words.

In a jiffy the yellow scamp was twisting in the grip of the Indian, but the dark hand did not relax its hold. There was fire in Mosco's eyes, and the hand grew tighter and tighter until Gabriel, attempting to cry out that he was ready to talk, found that he could not articulate a single word.

"Who was the dead man?" demanded Mosco. "He wore Don Ramon's garments and they buried him for the nabob of Centipede, but the missing finger joint told that he was not the gold king. You know he was some one else; you hold the secret which Don Ramon's wants require you to keep; but you must tell Mosco or die."

Old Gabriel tugged at the naked arm of the Indian. He wanted air, for he was suffocating beneath that awful grip, and when at last, by a superhuman effort, he managed to break it partially, he gasped and fell, black in the face, at the Indian's feet.

Knowing that he was dead, Mosco soon brought him to, and the moment he opened his eyes he was asked if he was ready to tell the truth.

Gabriel, fearing a repetition of his past experience, answered with a nod.

"Well," said the Maricopa, "was the dead man Don Ramon?"

"He was not."

"Ah, Mosco thought so, and Jaguar Juan said so the moment he saw the mutilated finger. But who dressed him in the nabob's clothes?"

Gabriel shook his head.

"You don't know?" said the Indian.

"Ask Felipe."

"The cat again!" smiled Mosco. "We will question him by and by. You don't know because you were not there! That is good reason, Gabriel. He did the work himself, did he?"

"Who did?"

"What a short memory," grinned the Indian. "Who did the work, eh? What, man, have you forgotten what nice hands Don Ramon has? When he was one of the Twin Bandits of the border he always kept them soft and they were very dangerous, too. He killed the man who was found dead in the palace; his soft hands strangled that man."

"Remember, I have not said so."

"But you will or take the consequences of a lie," retorted Mosco. "When you heard in your shanty that Don Ramon had been discovered dead in his chair, what did you think?"

"I thought it was true."

"Did you think she had found him?"

"By my soul, I did."

"But he came to tell you that it was not true, eh?"

Gabriel seemed to draw within himself like a turtle into his shell.

"He came and told you," the Indian went on.

"Hang it all, he came and told me," cried the old fellow. "You're bound to have it all, I see. If I tell you, what will you do with me?"

"I'll let you go to your master—to the devil if you want to," was the reply.

Old Gabriel caught at this straw and branched out in a wonderful story. He had the Indian for an attentive listener, and Mosco, standing before him with folded arms, let not a single word escape his ears.

The ex-thief of the desert talked rapidly for thirty minutes. Not once was he interrupted. When he stopped there seemed nothing more to say, and the Indian smiled his approval.

"I can go now, I guess?" said Gabriel.

"You can go," answered Mosco. "But beware of the woman with the soft hand."

Again the old smile of fearlessness came back to Gabriel's face. The Maricopa saw it again and wondered, but said nothing.

Gabriel went to the door of the shanty and took hold of the bridle-rein of the horse which had waited for the conclusion of the singular interview. He led the animal forth and mounted, all the while looking covertly at Mosco.

"You know more than you did before we came together," said he. "You'll have something to tell your master, the detective of Centipede. You'll open his eyes, won't you?"

"Jaguar Juan is no fool. He doesn't grope in the dark. He has bided his time for years—"

"To avenge an old crime," said Gabriel.

"Why didn't he strike before this? He had the man, Don Ramon, in his grip all the time."

"The time hadn't come. Jaguar Juan was waiting for the pup to grow."

"Ah, I see. He wanted Don Ramon to get a few more mines; he would have helped him, I guess. But he waited too long. The graveyard got the nabob, or a man supposed to be him, though I see you don't believe it, and then he became Juanita's trailer."

Gabriel laughed strangely at his own words, lifted his dirty hat to Mosco, and struck the flanks of his horse with the spur. Away went the border scamp, watched by the immobile Indian, who did not stir until the horse and rider had disappeared.

"Mosco has found out something," said the Maricopa detective. "He caught a fox and made him talk. Now he can go back to Jaguar Juan and we can track the game together. What a queer story Gabriel told Mosco. It was a nice game for big stakes, and to beat Jaguar Juan out of his triumph. If I had torn the

mask from Captain Dagger when we saw him on the trail I need not have asked Gabriel for all his tale."

The red-skin went back to the clump of bushes where he had left his horse, mounted and rode off. In a little while he was a dark spot on the surface of the valley, and the first streaks of daylight beheld him riding down the mountain trail which ended in Centipede City.

He rode into the town perceived by half a dozen of the early birds who had come to Jose's old den for their morning drink.

"That infernal Injun!" was the comment with which Mosco was greeted, but he did not notice the looks he got.

Riding down the main street of the nabob's camp, he stopped in front of Jaguar Juan's cabin, slid to the ground and entered. The hut was untenanted.

Crossing the apartment, Mosco found a crack in one of the logs, and thrusting in his long red fingers he drew forth a bit of paper which caused a smile to ripple over his face. In another moment he had read the few words the paper contained.

Those words must have been a revelation to the Indian juggler, for he looked up amazed and then went to the door, from which he could see Don Ramon's palace.

"In the grip of the Tribunal, and mad?" muttered Mosco, looking at the message again. "Captain Juan never lies. Mosco has come back in the nick of time. He must watch the wolves of Centipede. They will show their teeth while Juan and Manuel are away. The young American will feel those teeth if no onesteps between. What is he to Mosco? Nothing, but Jaguar Juan says, 'Stand by him,' and there Mosco stands."

The Indian replaced the paper in the crack and went out. The sun was shining in his face, and he saw the group of toughs who had gathered in front of the whisky den evidently waiting for him. The sight of them seemed to send the Indian forward.

In another instant he was approaching the den, and the men, who watched him like a lot of hawks, went inside. The movement meant trouble, but the Indian did not flinch. He apparently saw no danger, for he neared the open door and finally entered the trap.

The men had ranged themselves along the bar for a purpose. They were the nine athletes of Centipede, the slaves of Don Ramon; but now the henchmen of Chita Con and Major Serafe. They were ten to one, and that one a young Indian whose sole armament that morning was a juggler's knife.

Mosco, the Maricopa, walked straight to the bar, nodding to the statues there, and asked for his usual drink.

"Got back, eh?" asked one of the roughs.

"What did you find out for your master?" It was "the signal," and Mosco knew it. He turned from the bottle which had been pushed toward him and faced the tigers. He looked them over with an unflinching eye.

"Mosco is back," he said. "He goes and comes like the eagle. He asks no one when he can fly or when he can perch. He is no man's slave, and the hand of no nabob holds him in its palm."

Wasn't this challenge enough? Did the ten conspirators want more before they opened the battle?

A spark was all that was wanted to explode the powder, and it was at hand.

Mosco's words had hardly left his lips ere the hand of Taos Jack, big, burly, one-eyed and dangerous, fell like a trip-hammer on the dirty counter.

"I'm in no man's fist," cried he. "The Injun who follows Jaguar Juan is the slave of the Yellow Shadower."

The eyes of Mosco flashed. He threw discretion to the winds; his hand glided swiftly to his belt, and then ten men sprang at him.

The Indian fell back from the rush with the agility of a cat; he threw right and left the first two men he encountered, and the next moment he was seen standing in the middle of the den with the naked knife, ready for the deadly round-up.

The toughs of Centipede seemed to shrink from renewing the attack which had not met with the success it had been expected to score.

Ten to one, and yet the ten halted.

Mosco wanted the attack renewed; his eyes showed this. He stood erect and supple on the floor, and the knife caught the sunlight that came in at the open door.

During this tableau not a word was spoken. The situation was becoming embarrassing.

"You've got to go," suddenly cried Taos Jack, who had been one of those flung aside by the Indian. "We don't want Injun fingers in the pie we're bakin' hyer, and by heavens! we won't have 'em in it."

Mosco said nothing. He looked at the speaker as if measuring powers with him, and then stepped toward the bar, his eyes still fixed on Taos Jack.

"You heard me," growled Jack. "The blood of a runaway squaw is in your veins. It's an old story—"

The Indian went at the desperado with the

jump of a panther. He cleared the distance between them at a single bound, and the men of Centipede saw a collision, and heard a half-stifled oath. The following instant a man fell against the bar; he had not been killed, for the knife had not been used.

Mosco, the scarlet juggler, had merely thrown Taos Jack against the counter, face foremost, spoiling forever his good looks, and knocking out half a dozen teeth.

CHAPTER XX.

THE YELLOW-SKINNED TEMPTER.

THE eyes of the Indian flashed triumphantly on his work, and he fell back to his old position. The man so roughly handled recovered in a measure and got upon his feet again.

"Why don't you kill him?" he cried to his speechless companions. "It's ten to one, and hyer you've let him break my jaw without interfering."

The scene was ludicrous in the extreme. The blood was streaming from Taos Jack's mouth, and he spoke with difficulty. Mosco stood off, waiting for the next move and ready for it whatever it might be. His hand rested near the knife which he had returned to his belt, and his look of utter fearlessness seemed to invite the fray.

"By the eternal heavens! another time, spawn of a nameless squaw!" suddenly blurted Jack, growing black in the face from rage. "I'm going to get even if it takes me till my dying day. It won't be by fair means, I'll tell you this now. I'll take the meanest advantage I can, an' shoot you down like a dog. Gimme me whisky!"

The bruised ruffian turned to the bar and grasped with delight the black bottle which was pushed forward.

"Whenever you wish," said the Indian quietly. "Mosco is always ready for his enemies," and without more ado he walked from the den, leaving the ten toughs who had conspired to kill him there without his blood on their hands.

He went straight to the cabin he had left a few moments before. As he raised the latch he looked toward Don Ramon's palace and a smile touched his lips.

Five minutes later he came forth and walked toward the mansion. His head was erect and his step as stately as a conqueror's. He did not stop short of the nabob's stoop, and in a little while he was ringing the bell.

The door opened to show him the graceful figure but vacant face of Juanita, and the Indian glided into the house but stopped short, and stared at the beautiful victim of the strangling hand.

Juanita came close to him, but suddenly fell back and shuddered in one corner of the corridor. Mosco saw the movement and advanced.

"You don't fear Mosco, eh?" he said, putting out his hand from which Juanita drew back until she had squeezed herself into the corner. "I hurt no one but my enemies. The hand of Mosco is soft to woman, and he would not hurt Juanita for the big world outside."

His voice seemed to assure the shuddering girl; he touched her and then drew her from the corner, leading her unresisting down the hall to the parlor where he studied her face with much curiosity.

"It is true," said the Indian under his breath. "The silken hand did fasten on her throat. It has taken away her senses. She does not recognize Mosco."

He watched Juanita a minute longer, and then led her to a chair, upon which she sunk with a weary sigh.

"I'm going to find the hand that did this," he went on. "It must pay for this work. Jaguar Juan may look for the end of the mystery, but Mosco will hunt the soft hand that strangled Juanita. Did you hear the Maricopa, child? He is going to avenge you. He is going to the trail of the hand that choked you and when he has struck, your mind will come back and you will smile once more."

Juanita left her chair and came toward the Indian. She put forth a hand, and it fell with the softness of a snow-flake on the red-skin's arm. Mosco waited for her to speak.

Not a word fell from the girl's lips. Her eyes seemed to get an expression for a moment, and then all was blank again. In another instant she had gone back to the chair and was her old mad self again, looking vacantly at the Indian, but none the less beautiful for her condition. Mosco stepped forward and took up one of the idle hands. His teeth met madly as he looked down into her face.

"The hand shall be found!" said he. "It cannot escape Mosco. Over the desert he will follow it as the vulture follows his victim. He will make it suffer for this cruel blow. Mosco has a trail of his own. His brother, Juan, can look for the Mystery, but Mosco will follow the track of the strangling hand. When he comes back, Juanita, he may throw the hand into your lap."

He dropped the girl's hand and turned away; at the door he stopped for a moment and looked back at Juanita. A singular smile had come to her face like the passing of a sunbeam, but the

Indian did not allow it to stop him. He opened the door and went away.

"What think you took the red serpent thither, major?" asked Chita Con of his pard the little man of Centipede when the pair saw Mosco emerge from Don Ramon's palace.

"He's up to something," was the answer. "There's another man whom we've got to brush from our path."

"The Indian?"

"That Injun! He is dangerous. Jaguar Juan's pard, and, consequently, the American's friend. He cowed the ten in Jose's den, and Taos Jack will remember the scene to his dying day."

Major Serafe grinned.

"Jack's got the boss mouth in Arizona," said he. "They say the Indian handled him, big as he is, like a babe. It didn't last a minute. When Mosco went forward Jack struck the bar, his beauty spoiled for life. We must kill the red-skin!"

The two men walked down the street to the mine in which Don Ramon had a private office, and where Chita Con sought and found Felipe almost to his death as the reader will recollect. There the overseer closed the door behind them and they remained closeted for nearly an hour. When they came up from the mine they found that Mosco had departed and the men at Centipede were waiting a victim in place of the one who had slipped through their fingers by their own cowardice.

"Turn 'em on the American," suggested Major Serafe.

"You forget what Jaguar Juan said," was the reply.

"What, do you fear that ferret?" laughed the little man. "He told you what he would do if you touched the prisoner till he came back, did he? By Jove, I didn't know a threat could scare you."

Chita Con colored.

"If you fear to let loose the dogs of Centipede, turn him over to me," the major went on. "I haven't a past that makes me fear the Yellow Sandower. If we put off the work till Manuel drops in, we'll never get it done."

Manuel! Chita Con seemed to start at the mention of the big miner's name.

"We don't want Manuel to come between us and the game," continued the major, like Satan at the ear of Eve. "The man shoots at the drop of the hat. There's some kind of a tie between Manuel and Dirrell, though there's a good many years between their ages. The big miner is attached to the youngster. I can see that if you can't. He'd shed his last drop of blood for him; that's plain enough for me. Let him come back and find Dirrell alive in the net and we'll never get to finish the play."

Chita Con said nothing. He was thinking of the last words of Jaguar Juan in his cabin:

"Touch Dirrell if you dare!"

Major Serafe seemed to see that the master of Centipede was wavering. One more charge and the field was his. He put his hand on the overseer's arm and said:

"If we lose now we lose forever. Give the enemy rope and we are gone. There's no doubt of the love part of the game. Dirrell was brought to Centipede for a purpose by Manuel. Don Ramon's millions attracted the big miner, and he saw that the way to capture them was by netting the girl, and who so competent to do that as a handsome man like Dirrell? Talk about plots; what do you think of this one?"

Back fell the major and laughed a little.

"Dirrell was to marry Juanita, Don Ramon's heiress, and the ten mines would fall to the pair ere long," he went on, scarcely giving Chita Con time to digest what he had already said. "Let the girl get well, as she might do all of a sudden; let her tell what she knows about the strangling, and where are we if Manuel and Dirrell escape the snare?"

Captain Con was biting his lip and his hands were clinched.

"And yet you hesitate because Jaguar Juan threatened before he went away," the tempter continued. "Because he said he would hand you over to the avengers of blood if the Tribunal dealt with Dirrell before he came back, you are going to let the prize slip through our hand. Where are the 'avengers of blood'? He played a card which is worthless. You are not in the shadow of the avenging hand, Captain Con. The dead are dead, but the threat frightened you. Keep your promise and lose all—the mines, Juanita, everything. Don Ramon's death was a little soon for us, but we would not have lost on account of it. The obstacle in our way is the American called to Centipede by Manuel to win the girl and the bonanzas of the nabob."

Chita Con looked up and their eyes met.

"Are you ready to meet the consequences, major?" he asked.

"I'm ready to meet anything when the stakes are big," was the prompt reply.

"Then, go ahead."

The black orbs of the major flashed for joy. He knew what the three words meant; he had not talked in vain.

Ten minutes afterward, in the small apartment which the little man of Centipede called

home, six men were assembled. The spokesman was the major himself, and he leaned against the table with his arms folded.

"You will get ready for the play," he said, looking at the six. "To-night at twelve you will come to the appointed rendezvous ready for work. I will make the cage and prepare for the imprisonment. Say nothing outside of your band. The secret must be kept at the risk of life, for this is a deep affair and lips must be sealed forever."

The desperadoes listened without a word and nodded when the major concluded.

"I brought him to it at last," chuckled the little man when he had dismissed the men. "I thought I knew how to work him. I shall play to-night in the dark the hand that wins the game for us; I must throw the great trump of the trick. The young American disappears forever at twelve o'clock. He goes out like a candle, and the secret of his tomb will be known to no one but me. Thus ends Manuel's shrewd plot. Jaguar Juan may hunt, but he will not find. If he attempts to carry out his threat he will get left. We will turn on him. A trigger in the dark or a knife from behind quiets the most dangerous foe. Captain Dagger may wear his mask; he may continue to be the Mystery of the Hills, but what will we care when we are the Twin Nabobs of Centipede—Chita and me."

The little man opened a rough sideboard in the wall of the shanty and poured out a tumblerful of liquor.

"Here's to to-night's success!" cried he, draining the glass. "I have never failed yet when I had the whole affair in my own hands, and I won't fail now. When Manuel comes back, if he ever comes, he will find his friend and pard as dead as Don Ramon, and the little major will be cock of the walk."

In the hilarity of the moment he took another drink, and as he set the glass down a shadow passed the house. He caught a glimpse of it and ran to the door. The following moment he was leaning out and looking at a short and wiry figure which vanished while he gazed.

"Fool Number One has come back, I see," said the major. "Oh, we'll perforate his yellow skin. If I were you, Felipe, I'd put the world between me and Centipede."

Yes, Felipe, Don Ramon's servant and secret keeper, had come back, and if Major Serafe could have looked into the future and not very far into it either, he would have bestowed upon the little Greaser more than a derisive laugh.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE ROCK OF DEATH.

DICK DIRRELL, the young American, stood at the window of his cabin, gazing half-vacantly into the darkness without and wondering why Manuel did not return. He could not conceive what had taken the big miner away just at the beginning of a crisis which he could not have helped scouting, and he wondered if he would come back in time to take a hand in the game which he could see had received new impulse by his arrest.

It was night again, and the young man watched the shadows in the street with strange feelings. Something seemed to tell him that another crisis was at hand, and he had seen Chita Con go into the major's shanty, which was in sight of his own. Yes, something was in the wind.

While the guard had been withdrawn, Dirrell felt that he was still under espionage. He knew that he was in a den of human wildcats, who, led by Chita Con and the little man, thirsted for his blood because he was not of their sort. He could see through a part of the game for gold which the two conspirators were at, and he doubted not since his arrest that he was to be brushed aside as being in their way. But how in their way?

Jaguar Juan, before going off had opened his eyes to some extent, but there was still a mystery connected with the affair. He had incurred the hatred of Con and Major Serafe, and it was evident that he would be still further molested by the two desperadoes.

Dirrell saw the light in Jose's old den, he even heard the loud voices of its inmates, and after awhile he grew weary of these things.

A figure passed the cabin, but he saw it not. It was midnight now, and the American had sought the cot and fallen into a deep sleep. Outside shadows crept here and there; Chita Con had publicly announced in the den that he was going home, and went in that direction. He entered his shanty and dropped upon the cot in one corner. Ere long, he thought, it would be a bed in Don Ramon's palace.

If there had been any clocks in Centipede, they would have struck twelve before the shadows showed any system. Then they came together near the American's house. They crept close to the door and listened, very much like human beings. All was still; the victim slept.

At last a dark hand tried the wooden latch, but it did not yield. The owner of the hand went back to his companions, and there was a short consultation.

"We must do it now, lock or no lock," said a low voice, which sounded very much like the little major's. "There must be no failure. If

we shrink we shall be ruled by these two fellows, for Manuel will come back armed for victory. If you want such a state of affairs, go back and let me do it single-handed."

"We won't do that," was the response. "We've sworn to help you, and one man with a locked door don't scare us."

The dark eyes of the little man seemed to laugh.

Five minutes later the shadows went back to shanty door again. This time they did not try to lift the latch, but two pairs of shoulders were placed against the portal, and all at once the giants of Centipede threw all their weight on the hinges.

It would have taken a door of adamant to have successfully resisted that force. The door opened, and the two men almost fell into the room beyond.

The next moment a figure sprung from the cot in one corner, but the masked men saw it and went at it like tigers. Dirrell caught the foremost fellow and threw him against the logs, but others came to his rescue, and in less than ten seconds the friend of Manuel, the Big, was a prisoner.

They pulled Dirrell from the hut and threw a sack over his head, pressing it so close around his neck that he could scarcely breathe. He was walked rapidly across the street, where he was seen by the little man with the waxed mustache, and at a signal was hurried off toward the mines.

"I am in the hands of the Tribunal," thought the young man. "I have been sentenced in secret, and this is the carrying out of the decree. What do they care for Jaguar Juan? In God's name, where is Manuel?"

Well might such thoughts as these come to Dirrell in the excitement of the moment. He was in a deadlier trap than the one from which he had just escaped—he was now the prisoner of Major Serafe, the man who feared not the Yellow Shadower.

How he longed to have the sack taken from his head just long enough to let him see the yellow dog who was leading him to death. His blood seemed to boil when he thought of the conspiracy of which he was the victim, and once he stopped, only to be pushed on with a threat of death in his ears.

At last Dirrell knew that he was under ground. A singular smell came through the sack and told him this. He was in one of the mines, and this confirmed his belief that he was being taken down into the bowels of the earth to pass forever from the hands of his friends.

"Halt!" said a voice that thrilled the captive of the Tribunal, and the band stopped, Dirrell believed in utter darkness.

The hands that had encircled his wrists from the moment when he was led from the cabin now tightened their grip and he waited for the next move.

"Tie his hands," came the command, and Dirrell's hands were fastened on his back by means of ropes which seemed to cut into the flesh.

"It's all right now; you can return. Remember."

What did these words mean? Into whose hands had he been placed? And whither was he to be taken for final doom?

He heard the shuffling of heavy feet which told him that some people were moving away, and presently all was still, and but one hand touched him. He had been turned over to a single person for execution.

"This way," said the same voice, which had issued the commands. "I finish the play, Dick Dirrell. I promise not to keep you waiting very long."

Dirrell thought he knew the voice, but he said nothing. In his mind the time had not yet come for speech.

He was led away, down, down into the depths of the earth as it were. Now he touched the side of some unseen wall as he advanced, and now the passage seemed to widen. All the time the hand of his guide was at his arm.

The length of his journey, and the devious windings of that underground trail seemed to fire Dirrell's brain. Once he stopped with the intention of refusing to move another step, but a touch of something against his head told him that a six-shooter was gripped by the other hand. He shut his teeth hard, and went on.

The tramp ended at last. Dirrell was glad to rest. He could not tell how far he had come, but he guessed that he was more than a mile from the mouth of the mine.

He waited a moment and then the bag was jerked off his head and he saw the darkness of Egypt. At the same time the hand left his arm and he stood free. For a moment there was silence, and then the same voice spoke again.

"Dick Dirrell, you are the victim of the Tribunal of Centipede for all. You stand now in a living grave from which there is no escape. The existence of this place is known to but two living persons. It is in the depths of the earth, and beyond the ken of Manuel and the ferret of Centipede. Would you sooner be killed outright than be left to die a lingering death? I stand ready to accommodate you. I am the judicial executioner of the Centipedes—the avenger of the

Tribunal. Before we part we shall stand face to face for the last time and you shall me as I am."

"You need not go to the trouble of showing me your face. I know who you are," answered the American. "Your voice gives you away. You are Major Serafe."

A laugh rung through the darkness, and seemed to die away in some far-off place where the gloom was deeper still.

"You haven't decided yet," continued Dirrell's enemy. "Shall it be a speedy death, or would you rather take your chances and die hoping for that rescue which can never come?"

"I'll take my chances," was the reply. The following instant a lucifer scraped across the wall near by showed Dirrell first the rocky cavern to which he had been conducted, and then the figure of Major Serafe, fully clothed, with braided jacket, sash and high boots with gilt tassels, after the manner of a Mexican dandy. The little man was twisting his mustache with the hand not in other service, and his eyes had never looked so black before.

The major held the match so that the light fell at Dirrell's feet, and looking down he saw that he stood on the very edge of a pit the bottom of which he could not see.

"It's all around you," grinned Major Serafe, noticing the young miner's horrified look. "You stand on a pillar of rock which some devilish hand fashioned long ago for this hour. The pit of death lies beneath you. I am on the mainland, you on a pillar which has no connection with it. Ah, you take in the situation, I see."

Dirrell actually felt his cheek growing white. It was as Major Serafe said. He stood on a pillar of stone which rose from the middle of the pit; but how had he reached it?

If he could have followed the cat-eyed man of yellow, Major Serafe—he would have known that he had been conducted over a plank to his perilous position, and that the plank had been silently withdrawn by the major's hands. But he had not seen this; the darkness had shielded the little man's work, and the result was all that was apparent.

"You'll take your chances, will you?" suddenly cried the major. "I am willing to let you have them. The Tribunal has won its game, after all. When Jaguar Juan comes back from his trail of mystery, and when Manuel puts in an appearance, if he ever does, though it seems to me that he has deserted you, they will find Centipede in the grip of its Twin Nabobs, and the ten bonanzas of Don Ramon in the hands of Chita Con and your humble servant."

Major Serafe bowed in the light of his matches, and waved them toward the man on the pillar. Then he threw the little torch down into the pit, and Dirrell saw it gather flame as it descended, until it seemed to disappear somewhere toward China.

"Take your chances!" again laughed the man in high boots and braid. "This is one of the old mines of Centipede—one that is never worked saved by the ghosts of the dead, as you may see before death comes to blot you from existence. Climb down the pillar, if you will; explore your tomb if you want to. You are out of the drama now. The little plot of yours and Manuel's has failed. When Juanita comes back to her mind she'll be queen to one of the gold kings of Centipede—she'll be the wife of Major Serafe. Ah, good-night, señor."

Another bow, and another match flying down into the depths of the pit of darkness, and then the voice ceased.

"Not a word," muttered Dirrell to himself. "I won't answer the infernal rascal, but I'll wait till my time comes. It will come. I won't perish in this trap, but I'll live to grip the yellow throat of that diminutive devil. Then let him look out!"

The silence seemed to deepen, but all at once Dirrell, standing on his pillar, heard a laugh, and then all was as still as before.

Some minutes passed before the young prisoner moved. Then he stooped and felt the rock whose base was many feet below. It was almost smooth and perpendicular. The outlook appalled Dirrell. He sat down and reflected. An hour ago asleep in a locked cabin; now in the heart of an abandoned mine, on a rock from which there seemed no chance of escape!

And all because two men thought he had come to Centipede to make love to Juanita, the nabob's daughter.

CHAPTER XXII.

BACK IN GABRIEL'S SHANTY.

THERE stood in the shaded heart of a little valley of cacti, and in the light of a rising moon, many miles from the scene of Dick Dirrell's strange imprisonment, a man who had stood there for some time as motionless as a statue.

His eyes were directed toward a clump of bushes, which seemed to possess for him a vivid interest, though nothing about the clump indicated that it hid any one. The watcher was alone, and evidently afoot, for no horse was to be seen. Behind him rose the mountains which were a continuation of the Santa Rita Range, while before, the valley stretched away until its boundaries seemed beyond the reach of eye.

Still the man watched the clump of bushes, and if an ant had crawled from them he must have seen it.

Something did come from the bushes at last. It crept into the dull moonlight, and rose slowly from the ground like a cautious spy.

Of course the watcher saw it, but he did not move. His eyes got a twinkle of satisfaction—that was all.

"I'd have watched here till doomsday," said he, in undertones. "I thought the bushes shielded him. The very air seemed to betray him. Ah, what will he do?"

There was now standing in the shade of the clump a man whose figure was seen by the lone speaker. Having straightened, he had not moved for ten minutes, and his face was turned toward the west, or from the one on guard.

If the watcher could have looked closely, and perhaps he looked close enough to satisfy himself, he would have seen that the face of the other was concealed by a mask from behind which his eyes shone like twin stars. More than this, he was well-armed, and there was about him a brigandish air which gave him a rakish appearance.

He looked for all the world like Captain Dagger, and the man on the watch resembled Jaguar Juan, the Yellow Shadower.

The masked man at last stepped free of the shadowing bushes. He stood in the moonlight and looked toward the other clump which hid the figure of his watcher. Did he know the trailer was there? Had he seen Jaguar Juan creep on his belly from the trees across the valley, bending down the grass like a serpent, and stilling for a moment the song of the cricket?

"Why don't they find out?" smiled the man in the mask. "Where is the man who has sworn to discover who killed Don Ramon? Don Ramon! Ha! ha! With all his cunning Jaguar Juan is balked, he and his red ally. They can't find out anything. They go trailing up and down the country and lose the scent with the game right under their noses. This is good detective work. Why didn't the Yellow Shadower finish his work when the game was in hand? What made him lose months, with Don Ramon in reach all the time? Now, he will never pick up the skein again. The man and his Indian spy are no good."

The watcher did not hear these words though the wind blew toward him; but he listened as if he expected it to waft something to his ears.

"I've been here long enough," continued Captain Dagger. "I've had a good rest waiting for Felipe. I don't see what keeps the fellow. Surely he hasn't let the enemy net him. He must curb his temper. It won't do to go about stabbing people like Chita Con in their own houses. That sort of business will spoil the game and get somebody noosed; and I can't spare the yellow cat of Centipede."

The speaker raised the mask for a moment and drank in the breeze that came from the west, then resumed with a laugh.

"I wonder what's become of Perdita and old Gabriel? I scared the old scamp off with my story of her appearance and he must be running yet somewhere, the parchment-skinned villain! I'll go back to the horse."

He turned and came toward Jaguar Juan, his figure erect and his head thrown back. The detective of Centipede did not stir at the least movement would have betrayed him. Perhaps he was in hopes that some one would join Captain Dagger at the last moment.

"I'm devilish near tired of this rag," cried the masked Mystery, stopping short and clutching at his mask. "I long for the time when I can discard and come back to life. It seems to close me in like a prison. Gods, how I wish the right time had come for throwing it aside."

Jaguar Juan was holding his breath now, for the man had torn the mask off and stood revealed without it. But at that moment the moon became veiled by a cloud and he could see but indistinctly the features of the bandit.

"I guess I'm going to lose Felipe entirely," he heard Captain Dagger say. "If I had the fellow here I'd get some news—news about the trailer and the other people. I'd hear how the victim of the silken hand is progressing and how Manuel's little game goes. Manuel! I saw the resemblance the moment I set eyes on the young one and so did Felipe, the cat. Well, down goes the mask for even here there may be prying eyes."

Once more Captain Dagger came forward, and in a minute he had passed Jaguar Juan's hiding-place and was gone. But the ferret of Arizona was still watching him, and his eyes were as full of excitement as before.

"If Mosco could have been here what would he say?" the detective asked himself. "But Mosco more than suspects. Oh, I shall close in on the quarry."

Captain Dagger was not followed by the ferret, and when he had disappeared Jaguar Juan arose and crept back to his horse. He found the animal where he had been left, and in a little while he was in saddle and riding down the hill trail where shadows were thick enough.

Meantime the bandit was far from the spot where he had waited for Don Ramon's secret

keeper, Felipe. He had urged his steed into a gallop and was moving through a beautiful country with the moon shining full upon the mask which hid so much that was mysterious and unguessable to the inhabitants of the region.

"Maybe the old fool's come back for all," he suddenly exclaimed, and turning his steed he rode across a little stretch of stumpy timber and thence into a valley where he halted in front of old Gabriel's shanty.

Here Captain Dagger slid from his horse and opened the door wide enough for ingress though it stood ajar already.

"Not back yet," he laughed. "It was a big scare, sure enough. I suppose the old devil's across the border before this, and it'll be a long time before he pokes his head back into Arizona again. The next time he catches a woman lashed to a horse and riding over a desert, with a lot of vultures waiting to pick her bones, he won't leave her till she's really dead. The old fool—Hello, what's this?"

The foot of the masked bandit had struck something on the floor of the shanty and he was now bending over the object with a flaring lucifer in his hand.

"My God, it's a dead man!" he cried. "Is this the end of old Gabriel? Is this the outcome of his life?"

The corpse was black enough to have been taken for that of a negro, but the outlaw saw by the hair that it did not belong to that race. The body lay at the foot of one of the walls, just where it had fallen from the grip of the Unknown woman, and there were no marks of violence visible.

Captain Dagger held the match so close as to almost burn the mustache of the dead. Then he saw the glaring eyeballs, the clinched hands and the expression of horror which was visible despite the color of the face.

"This isn't Gabriel," said the bandit. "He'd make a better looking corpse, though he wasn't struck with beauty. This man has been killed, but how and by whom? Here's a case for you, Jaguar Juan. If you're too busy looking for the hand that strangled Don Ramon, you might give it over to your red dog, Mosco."

Some mysterious power seemed to hold Captain Dagger in the presence of the bloated corpse. He hunted around the room until he found old Gabriel's lamp, which he lighted and held over the dead.

All at once he pounced upon something that glittered on the floor close to the dead man's face. The next moment he held up in the lamp-light a tiny hoop of gold—a woman's ring.

The eyes behind the mask seemed to bulge out while he looked. He held the ring close to them and studied it with breathless curiosity.

"The dead man didn't wear this—that's certain," said he. "It wouldn't go over the tip of his little finger. It's a woman's ring, and it fell off where I found it. I see. She has been here. She killed this man—killed him with her infernal hands of silk. The spirit of ten tigresses is in that woman. I had her in my hands once and I was sure I had finished her. She went across the desert with clouds of vultures and the king of vultures, old Gabriel, on her track; but here she is, with her hands at work. If I was a coward like Gabriel, I'd mount and ride from her shadow; but I'm Captain Dagger, and while she lives I must play tiger to her tigress."

He turned the ring over and over and over in his hand. It was plain and without inscription—a little hoop of pure gold but full of silent language to him.

At last he put the ring in his pocket and looked toward the door. His horse was poking his head inside and sniffing the dead man. Captain Dagger went to the animal and took hold of the rein.

"It's nobody but a dead Greaser, Lightning," he said to the horse. "You've seen many such in your day. This is one of her victims. She's still strangling with those hands of hers, and she'd give her life almost to get to fasten on my throat. Wait! In a minute, horse."

He went back into the shanty and carried the lamp to the corner that contained Gabriel's cot. Here he stooped and felt under the dirty bed-clothes, but found nothing. Then he began to look elsewhere, but without result, and was about to extinguish the light when a snort from the horse at the door startled him.

He turned so quickly that the lamp went out—it was a poor affair, anyhow—and the next moment the door shut, and Captain Dagger felt that he was not the only living being in the hut.

For a moment he stood with his heart in his throat, never once thinking of the two revolvers he carried, nor of the knife that stuck in his sash. He was no longer alone. Somebody had come into the shanty, but the darkness rendered the identity of that person a mystery.

The masked outlaw of Arizona felt his heart rise in his mouth and throb there. The dead man lay between him and the door, and he was afraid to step forward lest in executing the act he should trip over the corpse and pitch headlong upon the knife of the Unseen.

The interior of Gabriel's hut did not measure more than eight by ten. The fugitive from woman's vengeance had built it for his own needs, and had never thought of it being the

dueling-ground for two deadly foes, and in the dark at that.

Captain Dagger felt along the wall and at last drew back into the corner at the head of the cot. He slipped his dagger from the sash and wound his fingers resolutely about the pearl hilt.

Having done this, he tried for a moment to make out the position of the unknown by his breathing, but failed. He was surrounded by silence.

"I'll draw him out," said he, under his breath. "His voice will tell me where he is, and then I'll show him a trick he knows nothing about."

The cornered bandit leaned toward the door in the darkness and cried:

"Who are you, and what want you here?"

The answer was not an instant delayed.

"I am the avenger of the Past, and you know what I want."

"Gods, 'tis she!" gasped Captain Dagger, and fell back to the logs, where he seemed to feel his blood congeal in his veins.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SILKEN GRIP.

THE man of blood and iron felt the full terror of the moment. It seemed to him that the hand of the unseen creature had been thrust forward to seize him, and, gripping his knife, he hugged the logs still closer and waited with his heart in his mouth for the assault. But it did not come.

He thought that he would have given a world for a light, yet he had matches in his pocket; he longed to look into the face of the person in the dark, yet, all he had to do was to strike one of his lucifers on the log at his right and let the little flame reveal all.

Fleeting seconds seemed leaden hours to Captain Dagger.

"I am the avenger of the Past, and you know what I want!"

Every syllable of this answer had sunk into his soul. It had revealed the identity of the speaker, as if there was but one avenger of the Past, and the outlaw of Arizona felt that the crisis of his career had come.

"If you are here, so am I," he said at last.

"Shall we not have some light on the scene?"

"If you think so, light one of your matches," was the reply. "It is all one to me."

Captain Dagger produced a match and struck it on the log. He exhibited the burning eagerness that consumed him by leaning forward as the flame grew, and in a moment he was looking at the person who had come.

Standing near the door was a woman who was well-clad in a close-fitting habit of black. She was beautiful despite the mark of years, and her pose was striking. She held no weapon in her hands that the masked bandit could see, and having looked into her eyes, his next glance had been at them. No knife, and she had come to avenge the Past!

"Light the lamp if you like; the match won't last," said the woman, and Captain Dagger obeyed.

"Did you think I would not find you?" was the next sentence he heard. "It was only a question of time," and a smile appeared at the cruel lips of the speaker.

"I did not think much about you," answered Captain Dagger in an assumed off-hand way.

"Because you counted me dead, eh?"

The bandit stepped forward until he had nothing but the table between him and the huntress.

"Let's waive this parley and come down to business," said he. "You have found me. You are a living example of the saying that a cat has nine lives. You have been here before."

"In this cabin?"

"In this shanty?"

"How do you know that?"

"The man lying yonder says so. Your hand did that."

The eyes of the woman wandered to the dead man on the ground, and again that old smile of triumph came back to her mouth.

"Did you recognize him?" she asked.

"No; but that made no difference; you killed him."

"Come, we are not dealing with the dead," cried the woman. "I am now dealing with the living, with—shall I say, Captain Dagger?"

"Just as you like."

"Very well. What did you strangle him for?"

The man at the table seemed to fall back a pace.

"You do not answer me," she went on. "He came to you unexpectedly, did he? He interfered in the game you were playing, and you thought he would expose you?"

"I did not ask him. He broke his word—threw his old oath to the winds! He crossed the dead line!"

"But you received him with open arms; you gave him assurances that you would listen to his story of suffering—"

"Did you send him to me?" broke in Captain Dagger. "Did you tell him to come to Centipede to rob me in order that you might become a gold princess somewhere?"

"I did not. I tried to keep him back. I told him that he was entering a lion's den, but he would not listen. 'Blood is thicker than water,'

said he, and went—to his doom! They buried him for Don Ramon. You know that."

There was no answer. Captain Dagger, drawn to his full stature, was looking at the speaker, and seemed to be wondering with which hand she choked her victims.

"They buried for Don Ramon, I say, the man who came to you for justice," she continued. "They found him arrayed in your garments, and Juanita fell from the sight with a cry of 'Father!' They took the supposed Don Ramon to the little cemetery on the mountain, and Captain Con stepped forth as nabob. But you are aware of all these things, I need not rehearse them. You saw your chance and embraced it. He held some of the secrets of the past, and that was enough to doom him. Then, he looked like you, and why shouldn't he? You were twins. Your mother died bringing you two brothers—Cain and Abel—into the world. Was it my misfortune that I loved Abel instead of Cain? Answer me, Captain Dagger."

"It was your choice," said the outlaw. "I had nothing to do with it."

"And my choice has made me the avenger of blood. I don't stand here to say that the victim of your hand was a paragon of virtue, but he was better than his brother."

"They wanted his head, too," smiled the man.

"So they did," said the woman, quickly.

"But he has tried to atone for the past."

"The hawk turned dove, did he?" sneered Captain Dagger.

"There!" cried the avenger, raising her hand warningly. "Don't besmirch my dead. He tried to make amends. He went to you for justice, but got your murderous hand. He came as Gomez, the Reformed, but was buried as Don Ramon, the nabob."

"He might have known."

For a moment the woman stood immobile before the man at the table.

"They call you Captain Dagger," said she.

"You have led a double life during twenty years of your accursed existence. When you were not in the saddle plundering people, and sometimes, to keep up the deception, even robbing yourself, you were amassing gold by the ton among so-called honest men—you were known as Don Ramon the millionaire. Man of two names—the Cain of the Southwest, I am come for vengeance. The blood of the man buried in your garments nerves my hand, and the old crime which sent me across the desert lashed to a horse, with Gabriel, the sand thief, watching for his opportunity to despoil the dead, sets my blood on fire. The time has come. Perdita is at the end of her vengeance-hunt."

The hand of the woman rose above the edge of the table. It was still weaponless, and as she turned, Captain Dagger saw what had until that moment escaped his eye—a dark, bleeding wound above the left ear.

"He did the best he could," she smiled, seeing his glance. "He had to shoot in the moonlight, and touched the trigger a little too soon. But I will find him. The world cannot hide forever the man who played vulture to my Mazeppa on the desert. I shall hunt Gabriel down, as I have hunted you."

Again Captain Dagger was measuring the speaker with his eye. He moved one foot around the corner of the table and thought himself ready for the silken hand. It should not strangle him.

"If I cheat Jaguar Juan out of his final victory he will forgive me," she went on. "I know why he has waited so long for his coup. He wanted you to become ten times millionaire so that he could enrich a certain person. I wonder what he thought when he saw the corpse in the palace?"

"I don't care what he thought!" flashed Captain Dagger. "But you want me?"

"Wait," said the woman, stepping to the door, but not removing her eyes from the nabob.

"The door is not quite shut. There! Will you step clear of the dead man at your feet?"

Captain Dagger complied, and at the same time showed her that he was armed with the knife whose hilt his hand encircled.

"Now, tigress, come on!" he exclaimed.

Perdita looked into the eyes that blazed behind the black mask and seemed to tremble.

"Do you pit hand against knife?" asked the outlaw nabob.

"Pardon me; I will become your equal," the avenger said, and there gleamed in the light of Gabriel's lamp a dagger as long as the nabob's, but with a thinner blade.

Perdita moved toward him and planted herself firmly a few feet away.

"This is to be to the death?" said she.

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

The two faced each other like the gladiators of the old-time arena. Captain Dagger's foot touching the arm of the dead man on the ground and the woman standing clear in the middle of the room.

"No, not the knife!" suddenly cried Perdita.

"I will keep my oath, or lose the game entirely. I was not to draw a drop of your blood, for you did not shed his."

She flung the dagger on the table as she spoke and it glittered there, sticking upright in the wood.

Captain Dagger was taken aback by this act; he looked at the quivering blade a second but that one was enough. It cost him dear.

Across the small space between them, like a panther flying through the air in its deadly leap, shot the woman of the trail. Captain Dagger threw up his hand; he saw his danger and struck at the breast of the mad huntress, but had his hand beaten down, and the following instant went toward the wall stumbling over the body and felt the dread hand of silk at his throat.

A nameless thrill of terror took possession of his soul. He struggled to unclasp the hand, dropping his knife in his eagerness to do so, but the grip tightened and he found himself at the mercy of the woman, his brother Gomez's widow.

Her arms seemed longer than his; they kept his hands from returning her grip, and he was soon choking under the pressure of the soft fingers.

The light burning on the table suddenly flickered and went out for want of oil and the room was wrapped in darkness, for the door being closed no ray of moonlight entered the apartment.

"He died by your hands and was buried in your garments," she hissed. "You shall die, not as Captain Dagger, but as Don Ramon, though the vultures may pick your bones under the mask of the outlaw. What will I do next? I shall go back to Centipede and play there the concluding hand. They tell me that Juanita, the Beautiful, is crazy; they say that Major Serafe wants to marry her in order to get his yellow fingers on the millions of Don Ramon, that Chita Con can't see through the machinations of his little pard, and that Manuel has imported a lover for the child. Ha, ha, what a game they have there! But I will play my hand. I will throw a card or two that will startle all. Don't you think I will be able to do it, captain?"

A man with ten fingers buried in his throat cannot speak with much ease and the nabob of Arizona could not say a word.

He had ceased to struggle, but not to think. He felt even thought deserting him, but at the last moment something seemed to come to his rescue—a cry of horror seemed to cut the darkness before his face and Perdita was pulled off though he was dragged half way across the room.

Yes, the tigress had been pulled from her victim. The door had opened, and a man had leaped into the place. Hands of iron had grasped the desperate woman, and she had fallen against the further logs, in her grip pieces of skin and clots of blood.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE CAT'S MISSION.

CAPTAIN DAGGER felt that rescue had come in the nick of time, and pulling himself together as soon as possible he cried out to his preserver to seize Perdita at once. But this was easier said than done.

With a cry that would have done credit to a baffled tigress, the woman with the silken hand was already on her feet, and before the captain's preserver could obey him, she was at the door of the shanty and the next second was gone.

Felipe—the rescuer was the yellow cat of Centipede—sprung to the door intent on following the avenging creature, but he was caught and thrown back into the cabin and when he recovered there was no person for him to catch.

He fell against the table, but drew off and struck a light. The match flared up and revealed, half-choked, Captain Dagger, breathing hard with his mask in his hand.

Felipe saw before him the white face of the counterfeit of the living Don Ramon of Centipede.

"Did she slip through your fingers?" demanded the gasping man.

"She's quicker than a cat," was the reply.

"A thousand curses! She had me in her grip, and Jove! what a grip it is."

"I believe it," and Felipe could not help smiling at the bleeding throat exposed to his gaze.

"She must have claws, eh?"

"The claws of a vulture," grated Captain Dagger. "Felipe, you have saved me for another time."

"How for another time? I don't quite understand."

"For another tussle with the she-cat of the South. We're bound to fight out the old feud. It would have been fought to a finish this time if you had not dropped in when you did. I owe you a thousand thanks, Felipe. Where did you come from?"

"From Centipede."

Captain Dagger slipped on his mask and took a seat at the table.

"What is new there?" he asked.

"They've netted a victim."

"Who have?"

"Chita Con and his yellow pard."

"Ah, the major!" smiled the bandit-nabob, as hidden eyes told the little man. "Who have they netted, Felipe?"

"They've caught the young American—Manuel's friend."

"I knew he was in the toils of the Tribunal. This is old news."

"But Jaguar Juan forced Chita to give him a breathing spell," Felipe hastened to say.

"Did he cow my devil of an overseer? And Chita agreed to give the American a respite?"

"He promised, but the promise did not bind Major Serafe."

"Of course not. The major wanted blood, yellow dog that he is. I'll bet my head that he crouched at Chita's ear like Satan at the ear of Eve."

"He did nothing else," grinned the Mexican. "He played a card himself in spite of the promise to Jaguar Juan."

"And carried out the sentence of the Tribunal?"

"Carried out a sentence of his own."

"Ha, this is late news from court," said Captain Dagger. "Well, what became of Dirrell?"

"He's under ground."

"Ho, in the mountain graveyard?"

"In the old mine."

The outlaw fell back and looked strangely at Felipe.

"Did he take his prisoner to the room with the pillar of stone?" he asked.

Felipe bowed.

"And left him there, of course?"

"And left him there."

"Felipe, there's some devilish ingenuity—some double dealing in this game," he went on. "Major Serafe plays no hand for nothing, and he always plays for big stakes. What is the stake—my millions?"

In another instant Felipe was leaning across the table, his eyes fairly blazing as they looked into the ones behind the black mask.

"Your millions and more," said he slowly.

"They pretend to have discovered that Manuel sent for Dirrell to help him out in his big scheme, that Dirrell was to make love."

The last word brought Captain Dagger upon his feet.

"To Juanita, of course!" he cried. "Felipe, did you rescue the young American?"

"Not I," exclaimed the Mexican. "Why should I snatch him from the dungeon of the pillars?"

"But you must; you must go back and save him from the trap of death."

Felipe looked amazed.

"Chita Con and Major Serafe are right; Manuel sent for the American for the purpose I have named. You don't want this man saved?"

"I do. If you won't execute the commission I will myself. I don't like Americans; you know this, Felipe. I wish they—all of them—had but one body, and I had it at the mercy of my revolver; but the man in the old mine must be saved."

"But Manuel's plan involves the netting of your millions," persisted Felipe.

"I don't care if it involves my hopes of paradise," thundered Captain Dagger, bringing his hand down on the table till it shook. "I say the young man must not die in Major Serafe's trap."

"It may be too late to save him now. He was left on the main pillar in the dark and one step seals his doom."

"He may not have taken it," said the outlaw. "You must go back."

"Now?"

"Now."

"She may come back after you."

"Let her come! I want another tussle with her," laughed Captain Dagger. "She knows all. Look yonder. She did that."

Felipe took the lamp and bent over the corpse on the floor.

"Did she strangle Jose Torano, the marked?" he asked looking up at his master.

"What, do you know the dead?"

"Tis Jose Torano. I haven't seen him for years, but I know him by his clipped ear; that is why they called him Jose, the Marked."

"Well, if he had been Jose, the Saint it would have been the same," said the bandit. "She would have killed him all the same. I don't see why she had to kill him."

"The old fellow has stolen from everybody in his lifetime. Maybe Perdita was getting even. I'm glad I'm not Jose."

"Well you may congratulate yourself. He died of too much grip. But this isn't saving the man in the mine."

Felipe backed toward the door.

"Look out for the silk band, master," he said, smiling. "Don't give it another chance; Felipe may not be near."

The answer was a smile from the bandit's eyes, and the next moment he heard Felipe speak to the horse he mounted at the door.

"He turns up in the nick of time," he muttered. "By heaven! that fellow must be the appointed guardian of my life. This isn't the first time he came when he was wanted. Gods! didn't I want him bad? And he passed his hand over his lacerated throat and swore when he thought of his narrow escape."

Already Felipe was riding across the little valley in which stood old Gabriel's shanty. The wind was blowing through his long black hair,

and he was curling the Malayish mustache he wore with his yellowish fingers.

"If I save him won't I lose the prize I'm after?" he asked himself aloud. "If he wins Juanita, the Mad, what is Felipe to do for a wife? By the holy cross! why should I go down into the depths of the old mine and rescue this accursed American from Major Serafe's trap? Save him, Felipe, and lose millions. Let his life go out where he is and you have only the plotters to fight. A knife in the dark does its work, and the wound never heals. Chita Con wants your blood, but you are his match. Major Serafe can stop a bullet as well as any other man. Felipe Morello, are you going to save the man who has come between you and the millions of Don Ramon?"

He rode on and on across the valley; he left it at last and entered the hills. Every now and then he would ask himself if he ought to carry out his mission, and every time came to the conclusion that by doing so he would lose millions and a pretty wife.

The yellow cat of Centipede was in a quandary.

The night wore on and the arrows of the day again sped over the landscape. Felipe was still in the saddle riding toward Centipede with his soul in revolt, and his hand ready to turn his steed into another trail.

"I hope he's taken the step" said Felipe.

"May St. Peter bar me out, if I don't hope he is no longer on the pillar, but dead at the bottom. Juanita will get well. She'll come back all right one of these days and be prettier than ever, and the bonanza queen of the Southwest. And I will lose her if this American escapes from Major Serafe's net. I will still be the slave of Captain Dagger, if he escapes the hand of Perdita; I will be nothing but Felipe, servant and serf. I don't like the outlook. It makes my blood boil. Some day Jaguar Juan will play his hand—the one he has been holding back. He is Jaguar Juan, Juanita's ferret; he has promised to find the band that strangled the man called Don Ramon. He is on the trail with his red pard, Mosco. He suspects; he believes that Don Ramon is not dead. The missing finger joint told him this. If he finds Captain Dagger he will lift his mask and take him over the old desert to justice. The price is still on his head. One of the Twin Bandits of the old border is dead. The dead man was Don Ramon's brother, Gomez. He came back unexpectedly; he found Don Ramon at home, for the time playing his old role of millionaire and not that of Captain Dagger. What passed between the brothers no one knows; but I found Gomez dead in Don Ramon's chair, and clad in his garments. But for the missing joint, Jaguar Juan would have given up his hunt. Ah, that was most unfortunate. The Indian juggler shook his head over the hand, and they went out to look for one supposed to be as dead as the Pharaohs. Chita Con and the little major believe him dead. They wonder who did them a favor by strangling the nabob. The fools! Where were their eyes when they went to the palace and looked at the dead man?"

Felipe laughed to himself till he thought of his mission and the man in the mine.

Then he suddenly became silent and rode many miles with a dark frown on his face.

At last he reached the elevated trail above Centipede. He drew rein and studied the scene for a few minutes.

"I'm to save him, am I?—save him to get ahead of me and help Manuel to play out his big scheme successfully. Yes, I'll save him. Rest easy, Don Ramon; Felipe will save your enemy the American."

He uttered the last words through his yellow teeth, and ended with a laugh; then he rode forward once more and entered Centipede.

Perhaps he thought that Chita Con or some of his minions were on the lookout for him, for he dodged into his old shanty and shut the door. Nobody had seen him; by the merest chance he had come back to Centipede unperceived, and his success was followed by a congratulatory chuckle.

The tongs of the camp passed and repassed the cabin; the sun came up and in due time passed down the western sky. If Chita Con had known who had returned, Felipe would have been taken from the shanty and paid for the stab in Jose's den. But he was there unknown, and was waiting for night with a beating heart.

CHAPTER XXV.

TWO DOGS IN THE DARK.

FELIPE grew very anxious as night approached. He thought most of two persons—the young man in the mine and the girl, Juanita, in the nabob's palace, and for two hours he vibrated between the two.

To save one was, in his mind, to lose the other, with the millions of Don Ramon, and he did not want to let the wealth of the man with the two names to slip through his hands.

He was debating how to steal to the mine when, happening to look from the little window of the shanty, he spied a man who sent him back with an exclamation of surprise.

The ferret of the mountain camp had come back.

Felipe went to the window again and watched the man who had just walked past the cabin, and followed him with his eye until he saw him mount the steps of the palace and ring the bell.

"A thousand curses on him!" cried the Mexican. "I wish he was in a pit of darkness. I wonder if his Indian is with him? Mebbe Manuel has come back, too," and then he clinched his hands, and finished with: "Now I will go to the mine, but not to save."

A few minutes later he slipped from the shanty and made his way through the shadows to the mouth of the old mine and thence into its depths. The place, dark as it was, was familiar to the yellow cat. It had been abandoned because of a ghost which was said to haunt its dismal shafts, and it required a good deal of courage on Felipe's part to place a foot beyond the threshold.

He was soon groping his way down the corridors toward the dungeon of the pillars and at last he stopped and listened. Not a sound came to his ears, and moving on again, he reached a spot where he crouched and used his ears again.

The man was above the pit to whose mercies Major Serafe had left Dick Dirrell, the young American. All was the gloom of Egypt below.

"Felipe knew that the pillar was right before him, and he tried to make out its outlines. But strain his eyes as he would, he could not accomplish his purpose, and he was compelled to give up in disgust.

What had become of Dirrell? Had he fallen from the stone monument to the ground below and there died a horrible death?

After awhile Felipe left the spot and moved on again only to halt in another place and listen as before. Still no sound.

"If dead, I'd like to know it," said he. "It would do my soul good to look into the dead eyes of the hated American, for then I would know that he won't rob me of Juanita the girl with the millions."

He was about to investigate the mystery still further, when a sound, which came from behind him made him turn as quickly as if a serpent had sounded its warning hiss.

Felipe straightened along the wall and drew his knife. He felt the blade to the point to make sure that it had lost none of its keenness by enforced idleness, and then waited for the unseen person, for he would have wagered his head that some one was in the mine.

"If he passes this way, I have him!" chuckled Felipe. "I'll throw out my hand and, presto! catch a throat; then, I'll use the knife, and finish somebody—not a friend, of course. I came down here in the nick of time. Don Ramon says I always do things that way and it's good policy to keep up one's reputation."

He laughed to himself while he waited, but if he could have seen who was in the mine, and not very far off at that moment, he would not have shown so much glee. But he did not know, thanks to the darkness, but he was destined to find out.

Some time elapsed before the Mexican heard again any sound which startled him. When it came it was as the falling of a stone from above, though he knew that no one could be there.

"Holy Dios!" he heard a voice exclaim. "It's as dark here as the pits of Egypt."

Felipe started. He knew the voice and calculated that the speaker was not more than ten feet from him.

"I saw the figure come into the mine," continued the same voice. "He is somewhere here and on mischief bent. But I'll find him; I won't let him get away, for he's one of those who are in our way."

"That's just what I am, major," said Felipe, under his breath, feeling anew the edge of his dagger. "Take another step and I'll show you what the hunted figure is at this precious moment."

The following second he was leaning forward with his knife, his arm drawn back ready for work, waiting for Major Serafe who was in the mine for a purpose. He did not appear to breathe; he was a cat in the dark.

All at once the unseen man took a step forward. Felipe heard it and measured the distance between them with the ear. He now threw out one hand, sent it as straight to the target as if he had daylight to direct him.

It caught just what he intended it to catch—a human throat, for there was a cry and an oath, and he held the writhing form of Major Serafe in his grip.

The little villain of Centipede struggled like a captured squirrel, but the hand of Felipe was strong, and knew just how to hold him fast. He forced the major against the wall and held him there while he raised the knife, but held it poised in the air as if debating whether to use it right away, or try to draw from the little man the meaning of his mission to the mine. Perhaps he knew what had become of Dirrell.

"I've got you like a rat in a trap," said Felipe, disguising his voice a little, but not enough, for it drew an exclamation of wonder from the major's throat. "What brought you to the mine?"

"Felipe!" cried Major Serafe.

"Yes, I'm Felipe," was the answer. "I'm

Felipe, commonly called The Cat. It's for you to say if I don't deserve the name, for I have caught you like a mouse. You are the little devil of Centipede—Major Serafe, the Man of the Tribunal."

There was no answer.

"What's the prisoner?" asked Felipe.

"What prisoner?"

"No lies, major," was the threatful response.

"What is the rat you brought to the trap?"

"Ay, where is he?" exclaimed the major.

Felipe almost released his captive.

"What, has he escaped?" he cried.

"He has escaped and you know it."

Felipe shook the major against the wall till he begged for mercy. "Don't accuse me of saving him," growled Don Ramon's servant. "If he has escaped he must be found. Come, we'll hunt him together."

"Do you mean it?"

"Why not? You and I are not friends, but we can hunt for this man with our knives in our belts. You hate him, so do I. Shall we look for him, major?"

Major Serafe was ready to accept of any compromise that would take the accursed fingers of Felipe from his throat and his knife from before his eyes. They made the bargain in the dark, each one determined to finish the other at the first sign of treachery.

Felipe released his prisoner and the two started along the wall, Major Serafe in the lead, but all the time more than half-expecting to feel a knife in his back. He led the way to the top of the circular wall which surrounded the room with the stone pillars.

"I'll show you," said he, turning to Felipe, striking a match on the stone. "He was out yonder on the pillar when I saw him last. Do you think he could jump from it to this spot?"

Felipe saw the captiveless pillar and then glanced down into the seemingly bottomless pit. Major Serafe, seeing his glance, threw the burning match downward, and the two watched it as it descended lighting up the interior of the pit and showing them that it was empty.

"I'm puzzled," said the major looking at Felipe. "I left him on the pillar and in the dark I say. A step either way would send him into the pit! What do you think, Cat?"

"He's been rescued."

"By whom?"

"Why not by the ghost that haunts this mine?"

Major Serafe laughed.

"Pish!" he cried. "The ghost of the mine is a myth. The story was invented to keep interlopers out—that was all."

"Then the pit must have an outlet."

"That, too, is impossible."

"When did you explore it?"

"I have never been down."

"Just as I expected," said Felipe. "You are talking on a subject you know nothing about. The pit has an opening, and the American has found it."

The last word was still on Felipe's tongue when, with the ferocity of a tiger, Major Serafe sprang upon him, and ten mad fingers were digging at his windpipe. Before Felipe could breathe he was being pushed over the edge of the wall.

With a cry of horror, which leaped from his throat without effort, he tried to save himself, but he felt the hot breath of the little man on his cheek and felt his body forced over the wall, and in a moment he was hanging along the stone, his only hold on life the grip he had on the major's laced collar.

"I'll pull him down with me," flashed through Felipe's mind. "By Heaven! he has the strength of a lion and the quickness of a cat. He fetched me here to do this; he had it in his head all the time. If I let him succeed I'll lose the girl and Don Ramon's millions."

He could not use his knife and was forced to cling to the arm he clutched.

"Down you go to investigate," laughed Major Serafe in the Cat's face. "If you find a hole let me know for I'm very anxious to hear how the American got away from me."

Felipe shut his teeth till they cracked, and struggled to prevent being shook off by his enemy.

"I'll see that you loosen your grip," said the major. "You hang on like death itself, but I'll fix you."

A moment of silence followed and then there rung through the darkness a terrible cry. Major Serafe had merely drawn a knife across Felipe's hands and the Mexican with the cry peeling from his throat had loosened his grip, and was falling downward.

"He'll find out, but mebbe he won't report," chuckled the major, leaning over the chasm and nearly out of breath. "If I hadn't cut him loose, he'd have pulled me over and I'd have lost the game."

He took a match from his pocket and when it was burning well, tossed it down into the pit.

With the eagerness of a born devil, he watched the flame descend and saw it reveal for half a second a man lying at the foot of the wall without life or motion. The head was doubled under the arms, but the major saw enough. It was Felipe.

"He'll never report," said he, while he eyed the figure. "Well, the Cat is out of the way, and will never get one of his claws on the bonanzas. I'll go back now and solve the mystery of the American's vanishment."

His match being out he did not light another, but left Felipe to the darkness that had fallen over him and glided down the corridor to turn up in another quarter of the mine.

And Felipe? He lay where he had fallen a good many minutes, an inert mass. At last he moved and then staggered to his feet. Looking up he clinched his hand and sent toward the top of the wall an oath of vengeance which if he could have heard it, would have blanched the victor's cheek.

Then he fell back clutching at empty air and cursing until he lay again like one surely dead on the ground already besmeared with his blood.

CHAPTER XXVI.

JAGUAR JUAN'S SIX HOURS.

MAJOR SERAFE went from the mine to Chita Con's cabin. He had news for the new Nabob of Centipede. Dirrell was not in the trap to which he had been consigned, but another man was there, and he was not likely to quit it very soon.

The moment the little man entered the nabob's shanty he was met by a sentence that sent him back with an exclamation of surprise.

"Jaguar Juan has come back," said Con, looking at his fellow-conspirator with a smile.

The major replied with an oath, and for a moment forgot his enemy in the mine.

"He's here as large as life," continued Chita Con.

"Where is he?"

"I don't think he will be very hard to find," was the answer. "I saw him awhile ago. What news have you?"

This brought the major back to his errand. He had told Chita Con about the doom to which Dirrell had been subjected, but now he had to break something really startling.

"Gone?" cried the new nabob. "Who rescued him?"

"Ay, that's the question, if he did not get away without help."

"He was left on the pillar?"

"I left him there."

Chita Con looked puzzled.

"It puzzles me, too," said the little man.

"But there's another in his place."

"How so?"

"I left the Cat of Centipede in the dungeon, and at the bottom and dead at that."

"I told you to save him for me; you know what I owe him."

"Yes, but when a man has to do a certain thing, he has to do it, that's all."

"A case of self-preservation, eh?"

"Yes, Felipe followed me to the mine; he was looking for Dirrell!"

"To kill him?"

"Probably to save; but never mind that. Jaguar Juan is back, and the prisoner has escaped, though he may still be in the mine. We must show our hand."

"Against the ferret?"

"Against Jaguar Juan."

"Go on. Your brain is fertile, major."

Chita Con leaned back in his chair and looked at the only man in Centipede in whom he had any great degree of confidence.

Major Serafe twisted the ends of the dark mustache a minute, reflectively, and then placed his yellow hand on the table.

"We must work swiftly and sure," said he.

"This man will miss Dirrell—he may have missed him ere this. He will want to know where he is; he may come to you for an explanation. You remember the threat he left behind?"

"I do."

"Don't think that he has forgotten it. Jaguar Juan isn't that sort of a man."

"But what makes him the young American's champion?"

"He's against us," was the quick response. "He is Juanita's ferret, sworn to find out who killed Don Ramon."

"By heavens! he can't find out by antagonizing us. What do we know about that crime?"

Chita Con, while he spoke, saw a smile settle down on Major Serafe's face. It was the smile that always puzzled him.

"We don't know who killed Don Ramon," said the little man, slowly. "We only know that whoever did, did us a favor. We, who want the millions of Centipede, would have dealt with him some time or other. The unknown hand came to our relief and helped us amazingly. But, Captain Con, did it ever strike you that the grave on the slope might not contain the man we've been talking about?"

In another moment the overseer was leaning over the table, gazing into the calm, imperturbable face of Major Serafe.

"In God's name, what are you driving at now?" he exclaimed. "What grave do you refer to? Didn't I see Don Ramon in his chair, and afterward help carry him to the mountain? You don't mean—"

He stopped and got pale.

"Let me tell you what I heard in the mine while I was tracking Felipe in the dark," said the major. "You know the acoustics of the old place?"

"I ought to," answered Chita Con.

"Well, Felipe has a habit of talking to himself when alone. You may know that, too. I heard some one jabbering in Spanish in the dark ahead of me, and I thought for a moment that there were two persons in the play. I slipped forward to catch the words, and lo! it was Felipe talking to Felipe. He was sent to the mine on hunt of Dirrell. He came back to Centipede to find the rat in an underground trap. The Cat was serving someone."

"But that one?" eagerly asked Chita Con.

"You may be surprised when I mention the name Felipe connected with his mission. It was the name of the masked scamp of the border!"

"Captain Dagger?"

"Captain Dagger. Felipe talked in such a strain as to leave no doubt in my mind as to who sent him back to camp for a purpose."

"But what interest can Captain Dagger take in Dirrell, the friend of Manuel, who is playing for the millions of Don Ramon?"

Major Serafe arose and went to the sideboard in the wall, and helped himself before he spoke again.

"Does it puzzle you, captain?" he asked, coming back, smacking his lips.

"Don't it puzzle you?" was the reply. "Captain Dagger sent Felipe, Don Ramon's secret keeper, to the rescue of Dirrell, the American? By heavens! it is enough to puzzle me. If you know anything, spit it out, major!"

"I don't know much, but I've thought out a few possibilities since listening to Felipe in the dark," said the little man. "In the first place, Felipe would never serve Captain Dagger unless he was against us."

"He's against the world—a masked Ishmaelite, as it were."

"Call him what you please, captain; but I have a new name for him."

"Speak it."

"I call him Don Ramon."

These five words were spoken while the major looked straight into the face across the table.

"Impossible!" cried Chita Con. "We buried him, I say."

"Hold! you forget the past," resumed Major Serafe. "There were two in the family; they were called the Twin Bandits."

A light seemed to break all at once into Chita Con's mind.

"You are right," he exclaimed, striking the table with his fist. "I recollect them. The name of the other was Gomez. He had a wife who looked like an angel."

Major Serafe grinned and bowed.

"She wasn't quite an angel, captain," said he, "but she was as pretty as one. Yes, there were two. They disappeared while the border States had out rewards for their heads, and it was said that Gomez was killed somewhere."

"I've heard the report."

"It was false! Gomez merely buried himself from the world and lived with his lovely wife somewhere, while Don Ramon founded Centipede, and rose to the position of boss, nabob, and the guardian of the lovely, but crazy Juanita."

Chita Con was listening to these words like a man spellbound. He did not let a syllable escape.

"The more I think about what I heard Felipe jabber in the mine the plainer everything becomes," continued the major. "He said something about a mutilated finger—"

"I noticed it. It was on Don Ramon's left hand. I never saw it before, but I did not think much of the circumstance at the time for everything was excitement."

"You did not know that Don Ramon was minus a finger joint?"

"I did not."

"Well, that marks the difference. The man on the mountain is Gomez."

"What brought him back?"

"God knows; his wife sent him, probably."

"Is she living?"

"You know what you've seen. The figure in camp the night Juanita was choked—the small footprints in the soft ground—the bit of ribbon found near the palace."

"You mean to say that the hand that strangled Juanita in the palace belongs to that woman? I see through the plot as you outline it. Gomez came back for a purpose; Don Ramon received him in the palace and killed him. They looked alike when they were bandits; and if the murdered man was Gomez, the resemblance was still remarkable. Why, Juanita called him father. But let Don Ramon be alive and masquerade as Captain Dagger; what does he mean by it?"

"He throws Jaguar Juan off the track," smiled the major. "The Yellow Shadower was biding his time; he was waiting for the millions to increase. But all at once Don Ramon gets out of the game—he is murdered, in his palace, and the detective is balked. I see through it, provided the masked robber and the nabob are one and the same person."

"Felipe knows, and he told me unwittingly in the mine."

Chita Con sat silent a long minute, watched like a hawk by the man across the table.

"You are right; we must close in on them," he said at last, raising his head and catching the eye of Major Serafe. "Shall we depend on the Tribunal? It had to back down in the American's case."

"We depend on ourselves and win," was the quick answer. "We know that the ferret is back; his Indian may not be far off, and Manuel may drop in ere long."

"To the devil with Manuel!" cried Chita Con, hoarsely. "He is the sleekest one of all and the man to be feared most."

"More than Jaguar Juan?"

"As much, at any rate. Manuel brought Dirrell here to win Juanita and reach Don Ramon's millions, through her, but he is ready to fight for them, if necessary. I don't like Manuel."

Major Serafe might have confirmed this observation if the door had not opened at that very moment, and the two conspirators looked aghast when they beheld on the step the handsome figure of Jaguar Juan, the human ferret. His face was as serene as a summer day, and as he leaned into the shanty and looked at the startled scoundrels he touched his hat and smiled.

"I hope I don't disturb you," said he, glancing from Chita Con to the major. "I've come back in the flesh, as you see, and want to pay my respects. How is the lady, Juanita?"

He addressed himself to the overseer, who, occupying the position he did, was supposed to have constant access to the palace.

"I guess she's coming on as well as can be expected," was Chita Con's reply.

"What does she say?"

"About the identity of the hand which throttled her? Nothing. It still remains a mystery. There's a chance for your talents, Jaguar Juan."

Captain Con made the last remark with a sly look at the major.

"I know who did it, gentlemen," said the Shadower. "You will release Dick Dirrell within six hours or somebody goes into the clutches of border justice. Good-night."

Jaguar Juan touched his hat once more, and, while the two men stared with open mouths, backed from the door, and was gone.

"The devil's to pay now," gasped Chita Con.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A SEVERED LASSO.

THE man's last words thrilled Chita Con.

"You will release Dirrell within six hours, or somebody will pass into the clutches of border justice!"

There was no mistaking the meaning of these words. They were intended for him, though the speaker did not look at any one particularly while he spoke.

"You heard him," cried the overseer, bending over the table and seizing Major Serafe's wrist. "I'm the man he referred to."

The little man with the yellow skin showed his teeth in a grin.

"I thought so," said he. "He's going to carry out the old threat. You recollect he said he would. Now what are you going to do about it?"

"I'd be a fool if I went there, eh? Well, I don't intend to go—not with the backing I've got here. Then, he hasn't found Dirrell, and yet you say he has escaped."

"He isn't in the pit of the pillar, at any rate," answered Major Serafe, showing that he was puzzled.

"But he may be somewhere in the mine. It's a strange place, you know."

"A dark, strange place—a mysterious hole in the ground. He may be still the prisoner of the gloomy depths. If he is I must know it."

"Yes, we must find out right away," and Chita Con jerked his hat from its peg. "Come, I'll go with you. I know the mine as well as any living creature can know it."

The two men left the shanty together and in a few minutes were at the mouth of the mine. They plunged into the dark places, and Chita Con went as straight as possible to the lodge which overlooked the circular pit. They had not come to the mine unprepared to clear up the mystery of the pit, for the overseer carried a long lasso, by means of which intended to lower himself into the dungeon.

Major Serafe struck a match and threw it down into the darkness.

"It'll show you Felipe," grinned the little man. "I left him lying at the foot of the wall and right beneath us. Now look."

The flame eddying downward lit up the cavern right well.

"There he is, as dead as a herring," cried Major Serafe. "He never moved when he struck."

The match fell alongside of the figure lying on the hard floor of the cavern and showed the two pards the motionless body of Felipe which they could identify by his clothes.

"One cat less," said Chita Con. "Now, I'll go down and search the hole."

In a short time he had made the lasso fast to a projecting rock in the side wall, and the major saw him lower himself over the edge and go down hand over hand.

Major Serafe leaned over the fringe and waited.

Presently he caught the flash of another match and then saw Chita Con moving around the lower wall with the burning stick in his hand.

"There's no outlet," came up to him. "The walls are solid."

"Then, in the devil's name, where is he?"

Con was seen to shake his head by the light of his lucifer.

"Look at Felipe," said the major. "Cats have nine lives, they say."

"Well, if this one had he's lost the last one," replied Con, who was bending over the figure on the stone.

"Dead, is he?"

"Gabriel will have to blow hard to wake him."

Major Serafe laughed at this and then a steely glitter appeared in his eyes. At the same time his hand moved toward his belt and fastened on the hilt of the knife he always carried there. At the very same moment Chita Con's match went out, but he put his hand forward and took the rope in his grip.

He had barely touched the lasso when a lot of rope descended on his head, and he fell back with a cry of horror which he could not suppress.

The fall was accompanied by no noise, and the big overseer stood for a minute in the darkness with his heart in his mouth and terror in his soul.

Was it accident or treachery? He said nothing until he had found the end of the rope, and then he stood erect for a moment, feeling the end of it. It had been cut off; a keen knife had cut it through without the trouble of a second stroke, and this is what took the overseer's breath.

"Major?" he called after a second's thought. "What made the rope slip from the rock?"

The echo of his own words was the only answer he received.

"You infernal traitor, I'll get even for this," cried Chita Con, striding toward the wall, and shaking his fist at the man whom he imagined was overhead looking down through the darkness with the countenance of a fiend. "It was a slick trick, but I'll show you a slicker before long. By the living God! you shall die the meanest death you ever dreamt of. I lied to you awhile ago; the dungeon has an outlet. I will show you that you plot against the wrong man. Food for vultures! You shall be worse than that!"

Still, the only sound he heard was the same echo of his own voice. If the little man of Centipede heard him he did not reply, but saved his words for another time.

"Keep your tongue between your teeth till I pull it out," continued Chita Con. "I'll do that ere long. What are you playing for? Weren't the five millions—your share, enough? Do you want all—the girl included? You'll get what you'll have to be satisfied with—death."

To all this, silence was the only reply, and Chita Con soon desisted. He went back to where the lasso lay and mechanically picked it up.

Meantime, a man was moving down one of the stygian corridors of the mine toward the mouth of it. It was Major Serafe. He reached the opening, came up into the starlight and glided away toward the cabins.

"Who's nabob now?" he said in undertones.

"What's the use of taking half when you can get all just by cutting a rope? Major, you played the biggest hand you ever held; you've trumped Chita's trump, and if you don't make a fool of yourself, you'll be Don Ramon the Second within a few hours."

He went down to his own cabin and remained there a few moments. When he came out he went over to Chita Con's house and placed a piece of paper on the table. Having done these things, he went down to Jose's den and beckoned to Taos Jack, the man whom Mosco threw against the counter.

"The captain's gone off on risky business," said the little man to Taos. "He's left a document on his table which I see, without reading, is important. I want you to open it with me, Jack."

Jack said "certainly," and the major led the way to Chita Con's shanty. They found the paper on the table just where it had been placed a few minutes before, and Jack held the light while the major read as follows:

"TO THE MEN OF CENTIPEDE:—"

"I go away on risky business—on business that affects us all. Should I not come back within twenty-four hours, I ask that you accept Major Serafe, my old friend, for your counsellor and chief. Obey him as you obey me, and as you have obeyed Don Ramon. Remember, the man who refuses to obey me in this shall be tried by the Tribunal for treason."

"CAPTAIN CON,
Master of Centipede."

"When did he go away?" asked Taos Jack when Major Serafe finished reading the forgery.

"I don't know, but I'll be liberal. I don't

want to assume the responsibilities of the position of master. I'd sooner be plain Major Serafe. Captain Con may come back, but he has taken precautions. This document proves it. You may tell the boys, Jack. If he isn't back in twenty-four hours, say from now—I'll be your head. Will the crowd obey me?"

Major Serafe looked into the face of Taos Jack as he spoke.

"We like Chita Con—a darned sight better than Don Ramon. He says in that document to obey you if he don't come back. Ain't that orders? We've got to serve somebody—we have to have a head, I mean. What's the difference who it is so long as we have all the dust we need?"

"That's sense," answered the major, and quietly folded the forgery and hid it in his bosom. "I'll be liberal, I say. I want Con to come back, by the holy cross I do! But he may not, you see."

Taos Jack "saw," for he nodded, and remembering that he had not finished the game at Jose's, backed toward the door and was soon going back to the den. Major Serafe accompanied him to a certain point, when he left him and went toward Juanita's home.

"I won't stay long, but I want to see for myself how she is getting along," he said to himself. "I'll soon be master here and have access to the palace at all hours, but I want a peep at the prize to-night."

There was one peculiarity about Don Ramon's palace, its doors had never been locked.

The little man went up the step and turned the knob without ringing. The portal yielded and he went in. A light was burning in the main corridor, but it did not shed its rays to the further end. Major Serafe, always suspicious, put his hand on the hilt of his knife and went on.

He reached the door and stopped. The room ahead was the one in which Don Ramon had been found dead, or the man at least supposed to be the border nabob.

He had heard that Juanita since her misfortune frequented this chamber as if some strange spell controlled her, and he more than half expected to find her there.

In another minute he had opened the door and was over the threshold. A dim light was burning over the nabob's desk. The major caught sight of some one there; a figure sat in the nabob's chair.

He moved forward on tip-toe, but his cat-like tread was not soft enough. All at once the person at the desk looked up and Major Serafe, with a cry which would have aroused the soundest sleeper, recoiled and then stood on one of the bouquets in the carpet, white and staring.

He was looking into the eyes of Captain Dagger, for the black mask concealed the face, and while he stared, the man arose and came toward him with a devilish laugh of triumph.

The little man moved as the gloved hand was lifted, but too late. The next instant he was in the grip of the man he had disturbed.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CAPTAIN DAGGER AND THE MAJOR.

THE yellow man of Centipede thought of his dagger, but did not attempt to draw, for the piercing eyes behind the mask seemed to hold back his hand.

Not a word was spoken as Captain Dagger drew his prey toward the desk, and a moment later the major was looking up at the bandit from the depths of the chair.

He thought of what he had heard Felipe say to himself in the gloom of the mine where, at that very moment, he lay dead in the dungeon that also held Chita Con. The man above him was not Captain Dagger, but Don Ramon; the person buried as the nabob was his twin brother Gomez, Perdita's husband, and for years this fellow had been living under two names—being Captain Dagger in the mountains, and Don Ramon in Centipede.

Major Serafe thought rapidly of these things while he eyed the man who had caught him. What would his captor do? Would he try to let on that he was Captain Dagger and not the so-called dead nabob?

The major glanced at his hands. They were incased in gloves, but he could not see that any finger was mutilated. The dead man had a missing joint.

"What brought you here?" demanded Captain Dagger breaking the silence between them and it was time, too, for it was growing irksome.

"I might ask you the same question," answered the little man with a grin. "You don't quit your mountain retreats long enough to explore the camps of the border, and that's why I should ask your business in Centipede. I did not expect to find you here. I'll admit that."

"No admission is necessary. You came to the palace for an evil purpose."

Major Serafe was debating in his mind whether it would be policy to tell this masked man that he knew him. He knew the voice; it was Don Ramon's; and the hands were small like the nabob's.

All at once the major looked toward the desk.

It was open and he saw some documents which still further convinced him as to the identity of the man.

"It was a slick game and well played, too," said he at last.

"What do you mean?"

"Why your game of course. Nine-tenths of Centipede believe that you are over yonder on the hill."

"But you don't eh?"

"Of course I don't," said the major, becoming bolder. "Seeing's believing. In short"—he lowered his voice—"in short, you are Don Ramon."

The man with the mask started visibly. His eyes seemed to get a wicked gleam, his face came closer to the one upturned to it and the gloved hands were raised.

"You don't deny it," continued the major. "You can't. Though you came here as Captain Dagger, bandit and robber, you are Don Ramon, nabob and the hunted man of the past."

There was no answer, but the major saw one of the hands move toward the desk and seize one of the papers lying there.

"Captain Dagger would not know where to find important papers belonging to Don Ramon," the little man went on. "I have no doubt that you came straight to them, and yet you want me to believe that you are not the once master of this house."

He heard a laugh from the unseen lips.

"You are very shrewd, my little cat," they said a moment later. "I know more about you than you think I do. You've always got a game on hand—lots of trumps in it, and you're ever on the alert for a good chance to play them. When did you play your last one?—to-night, eh?"

The major started. It seemed to him for half a second that Don Ramon knew about the tragedy in the mine—that he had cut a rope that consigned Chita Con to a living death in the heart of the old place; but how could he know?

"You dare not show your face," suddenly spoke the major in a bantering tone. "Don't be afraid, captain. The Yellow Shadower is not at the window."

The eyes behind the mask looked instinctively at the window as if their own expected to see there the face of the man just named. It made Major Serafe smile.

"I guess I'll go," resumed the major, rising, but the next instant the gloved hands pounced, eagle-like, upon him, and he was pushed back into the chair.

"When I'm done with you!" said the hidden lips, sternly, and the little man made no answer.

"How is the young lady?" asked Captain Dagger.

"What, haven't you seen her?"

"Would I have asked you if I had? Is she getting better?"

"I have seen her but once since she was throttled."

"But you have heard. Chita has had access to the house as master, in Don Ramon's place. What does he say?"

"The chances are against her. The silken hands have a terrible grip."

"The silken hands, eh?" cried the masked man. "I thought Dirrell, the American, did it."

The major winced.

"You need not try to fix up the blunder," laughed Captain Dagger. "It was a slip of the tongue, but you told the truth. The silken hands! Did you ever feel them, major?"

The little man shook his head.

"If they always grip like that I don't want to," he said with a perceptible shudder.

"Well, they do," was the reply. "They generally kill, and you rather like the experience after reaching a certain stage; they're so soft, you know."

"And the deadlier for their softness," smiled the major. "I beg to be excused, captain."

"So the chances are against Juanita," mused Captain Dagger. "Is she wasting away?"

"Not that, but she seems to be melancholy. Her eyes don't sparkle like they used to—before she was strangled."

It seemed to the major that an oath which did not fully escape was bitten in twain by the concealed teeth.

"What will you tell when you get out of this house?" suddenly questioned Captain Dagger.

"I don't have to tell anything," was the reply.

"But you've seen Captain Dagger in the house of Don Ramon."

"No, I've seen Don Ramon in his own palace," corrected the major.

The black eyes twinkled.

"Don Ramon never did trust you very far," their owner said. "He knew your past and thought you would try to play one of your secret trumps against him."

"Did I ever play one of them?"

"No, but it was because you were watched like a hawk. Don Ramon didn't give you a chance to throw the card you had in your hand. As Judge of the Tribunal of Centipede, you had your hands full of other things, but there was

one man whom you would liked to have brought up for sentence. His name was Don Ramon."

The major fell back into the depths of the chair.

"I know you, and now no further concealment shall be attempted. I am Don Ramon."

The last words came forth in a whisper and were spoken with the captain bending down until his face almost touched that of the occupant of the chair.

"I would have sworn it," said the major, grinning. "You'll always find it hard to fool me."

"Move round to the desk there," commanded the masked man. "There! Take up a pen and write to my dictation."

Major Serafe hesitated and glanced upward into the eyes overhead.

One of the gloved hands shoved the paper toward him, and the ink-stand was at his elbow.

"I'll see how far he'll carry this," thought the little devil in yellow. "He don't get me to confess to anything over my signature. I know when to stop," and he picked up the pen and inked it.

"Go ahead," he said. "What is it you want me to write?"

"I, Major Serafe, at this moment in good health, but ever mindful of the uncertainty of human existence—"

"Great Heaven! that's the way wills begin," broke in the major.

"A will, and your own, is just what you're going to write," was the retort.

"My will?"

"None other. Let me see: where were we? 'Ever mindful of the uncertainty of human existence I do will my soul to the Arch Fiend, and my body to—'"

Captain Dagger was interrupted by a loud cry; it came from Major Serafe's throat and he was on his feet, his hands for the first time at his belt, and tearing away at his dagger which seemed glued to the scabbard.

"I'll write nothing of the kind!" he exclaimed, throwing a mad look at the paper. "You intend to kill me with the same hands that strangled Gomez, your twin brother, because he came to you unexpectedly. Mayhap Perdita sent him and he came for justice."

"Never mind that. I want you to write your will. I promise you that it will be given prominence. It shall adorn the public bulletin board of Centipede—where you were wont to post the decrees of the Tribunal."

"But where will I be, then?"

"You'll be dead."

The gloved hand before the major made a quick sweep toward the hand which had wrenched the dagger from its sheath, and the fingers of the man in the mask seemed to sink to the bone.

Major Serafe was dragged back to the chair by a power which did not appear at all human. He was pushed down into it, and the pen put between his fingers.

"Now, go to work," said the bandit sternly. "I did not come here to trifle. I am one against the hunters and huntresses of the border. I will be millionaire without a living foe, or know why. Vermin like you I will crush as I go along. I ought to turn you over to Felipe as being beneath me, but I'll make sure of you while I have you in my grip."

A cold sweat had started out on Major Serafe's temples; his hands were nerveless; the pen fell from his grasp and rolled across the desk.

"You don't want a will, I see," laughed Captain Dagger. "Very well. We'll dispense with it. Twenty years ago a man rode into a certain town with a posse of vigilantes behind him. He had promised to guide them to the hut of a person who had a price on his head; but they did not find the hunted man. The guide was a traitor then, and he hasn't improved one whit since. Major, you've found your man at last. The old price is still on his head, but you will never get the reward; neither will Jaguar Juan the Yellow Shadower of Centipede. Stand up."

There was not the slightest movement on the little major's part.

"I sha'n't do it here," continued Captain Dagger. "I was found dead in this room—found dead, ha, ha! Come, let us go elsewhere. Are you sure that you don't want a will?"

At the same time the gloved hand of the bandit-nabob lifted the major from the chair and dragged him across the carpet. He could not have found his tongue if a thousand deaths had menaced him. He was more than half dead already.

Captain Dagger opened a door and drew his prey across the step; but the next moment his progress was interrupted by a piercing scream, and he found himself face to face with the beautiful Juanita, the mad heiress of Centipede.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN THE TWO FERRETS' GRIP.

"Gods! if the mad girl saves me, I'll bless her the rest of my life!" mentally exclaimed the major.

Captain Dagger fell back and stared at the

girl. She stood erect, with her eyes fastened on the bandit and her form drawn up to a striking attitude.

"Don't fear her, captain," said Major Serafe in tones full of biting sarcasm. "It's only Juanita, and you have seen her before. She seems to recognize you in spite of the mask, and—"

"Silence!" cried the nabob through his teeth, at the same time sinking his gloved hand deeper into the major's flesh. "Go to your room, child. I'll see you by and by."

Juanita looked for a moment longer, and then turned suddenly and swept from the apartment. The major's heart sunk within him while in Captain Dagger's eye appeared a flash of victory.

"She knows her master," he said, looking down at his prey. "She is still a pliant object in my hands, and will always be such. You expected her to save you, but you are yet in the shadow of doom."

There was no answer, and when the door had closed behind Juanita the bandit dragged his man across the floor and opened another door which showed them a darkened chamber.

In one corner of this room Captain Dagger raised a trap-door, and the little man of Centipede saw yawning at his feet a dark hole which was ready to engulf them both. In an instant a terrible thought took possession of his mind.

He was to be taken into the depths of a mine and there terminate his career of deceit and rascality.

A flight of steps led into the darkness, and the bandit-nabob conducted his prisoner into the place, and the two men stood in gloom which rivaled that of the caves of Egypt. The grip of the gloved hand was still at Major Serafe's wrist, and was as cold as the clutch of a corpse.

Not a word was spoken by either man while they threaded this corridor, which was tortuous, and when they halted in what the major believed was a chamber of ample proportions, the silence that seemed to settle down upon them was torture itself.

Captain Dagger drew a match across the unseemly wall, and the flame revealed the place. A chair stood in the center of the room; it was clumsy and very strong, and over the arms hung some ropes which at once caught the major's eyes with terrible suggestiveness.

The bandit-nabob pushed his prisoner toward the chair, and forced him into it. The match went out, but he picked up a candle from somewhere and reilluminated the place.

"The chair hasn't held any one for some time," said the outlaw, in response to the major's look. "But it hasn't lost its cunning, as I will show you."

As he spoke he made a quick pass behind the victim's head, and in an instant there came up over the top of the chair a pair of hand-like objects that fell over the little man's neck and pulled him back against the wood.

"What are you going to do?" gasped the major.

"Nothing, my dear major," was the reply. "The chair will do it all. You will be found here when the Day of Judgment dawns!"

The little man, sallow before, was white now. His teeth chattered, and his whole frame sweat cold drops.

Captain Dagger touched a spring with his foot, and mechanism like the claws which had already performed their work came up over the sides of the chair and pinioned the major's arms so that they were useless.

"You're a merciless devil!" flashed the captive of the chair. "If I had dreamed of this, by heavens! I would have led the Vigilantes to you years ago."

"You should have had dreams," was the heartless rejoinder, accompanied by a bitter laugh. "It is too late now. I wish you a happy time with the inhabitants of the dungeon, major."

Captain Dagger drew back, but left the candle burning where it would shed its light upon the man doomed to a terrible death by his hand. He looked at Major Serafe, and the look was returned with interest.

"Vengeance will come," said the little man. "This is your last trump, Don Ramon. You may play it to my destruction, but another holds one that will sweep it in. I've killed your right bower. There's some consolation in that thought. When you want Felipe to help you against the combination, Felipe won't come."

"Why won't he come?" asked Captain Dagger, leaning forward.

"Felipe is dead."

A horrible look lit up the bandit's eyes.

"Who killed Felipe?" he cried.

"I had that honor," was the quick retort. "I left the cat with nine lives, with the last one gone out, and the cat as dead as the cats of Egypt."

For a moment Don Ramon seemed on the eve of throwing himself upon the man in the chair, but he suddenly fell back again and left him its living prisoner.

"So you killed Felipe!" said he, watching the major. "Stay where you are and pay for that deed. Farewell!"

Once more he went back, this time to the entrance, and the next moment the little plotter

was the sole occupant of the cell with the candle throwing his shadow on the wall behind him.

He listened, but could not hear the receding footsteps of his tormentor, but imagined that he could see him going back to the palace to resume his old place at the desk, and afterward to go back to the mountain, there to be Captain Dagger again until the game which he was playing—the baffling of Jaguar Juan—should summon him back to the role of Don Ramon.

The major looked at the sputtering candle and tried to calculate how long it would last him. When it went out he would be in total darkness, and then perhaps the "inhabitants" referred to by Captain Dagger would come.

The identity of these inhabitants was not much of a puzzle to the imprisoned man. He knew that the mines of Centipede swarmed with rats of the most terrible description, for he had seen them with his own eyes, and had been compelled to fight them in the depths of the gold-ribbed earth.

He shuddered when he thought of the attack in the dark with the loathsome creatures swarming over him and burying their poisonous teeth in his flesh. The very horror of the thought seemed to give him supernatural strength and he tugged at his bonds only to find that they would successfully resist the power of a giant, and exhausted and cursing he desisted.

Meantime, Captain Dagger had gone back to the nabob's palace. He went direct to the room in which the major had surprised him and sat at the desk until after midnight. Then he slipped from the house without disturbing Juanita, and went down the path leading from the west side of the camp.

Once more he was in the saddle and Captain Dagger again. He looked back at the one light in Centipede and knew that where it was the all-night gamblers were at play in Jose's den, and then, with a gleaming eye and words that shook the mask over his handsome face, touched his steed with the spurs and was off.

At the same time a man came out of one of the cabins of Centipede and moved on the nabob's palace. He opened the door and entered.

Passing down the main hall he entered the room where the major had surprised the bandit-nabob to his sorrow, and turned on the light. Bending over the desk, this man, who was the keen-eyed ferret of the gold camp, raised the lid and fingered the papers which were presented for inspection. He picked up the pen and looked at it.

"I thought so," said he with a smile. "He was here! He came back to his own and went off again. More proof that we are on the right trail—that Mosco and I are after the old-time vulture of the border. I wonder if the girl saw him? I wonder, too, if Chita Con knew of his coming back? Ah, when I have the devil in my grip—when I have finished my mission, I will go back to the old town and be somebody besides Jaguar Juan the Yellow Shadower."

At this time the detective was going through the papers in the nabob's desk. They told him that the nabob had been there, he had handled those very documents, and he knew that Captain Dagger had slipped through the lines and escaped to his mountain haunts, there to invade the Territory of the Woman with the Silken Hand.

After a while the ferret left the room and went back; he had apparently seen enough to satisfy him for the night, but among the dark shadows in the yard in front of the palace he heard the lightest step an ear can catch, and the next instant he was face to face with an Indian.

"Mosco!" cried Jaguar Juan, springing forward and taking the red-skin's hand. "I was just thinking about you. What news have you for me?"

The red juggler bent forward, his scarlet fingers returning the pressure the detective had given, and whispered a name.

"Here?—in Centipede, did you say, Mosco?" cried Jaguar Juan. "By my soul! you have been a faithful hunter. Where is she?"

"Watching the palace for the vulture of the sands."

"Now?"

"Now."

The red-skin drew Jaguar Juan back behind the house, and they crouched among the shrubbery there and said nothing.

The silence of the tomb had fallen over the spot, and though the companions strained their eyes they saw nothing suspicious.

"She has followed him," said the detective at last with his lips at Mosco's ears.

The Indian shook his head.

The following moment there arose above the tops of some bushes a figure which at once commanded their attention. It stood in the bright starlight like a statue, and the ferrets could see that it had the outlines of a member of the softer sex.

"It is Perdita, the bandit-nabob hunter," whispered Jaguar Juan.

Mosco neither spoke or nodded; he was a dark study in stone as it were.

Presently the figure by the clump of bushes moved and toward the house.

"I seek him in his own den," said a low voice. "If he will not come to me I will go to him. I

lost him in Old Gabriel's shanty because the yellow cat came in the nick of time and pulled me off. This time he may not have the Mexican for a guard. He knows that I am on his trail to the death—that I intend to undeceive the men of Centipede who think that on the mountain sleeps Don Ramon, their nabob. They're playing yet," she glanced toward the gambling-den. "If I could throw among them the unmasked head of Captain Dagger they would know that a man may live two lives at the same time—be Don Ramon and bandit all in one."

The speaker advanced to the very step of the palace before either of the shadow pards moved.

"It won't do," said Jaguar Juan. "Juanita, the poor, mad heiress, is beyond the door. If Perdita finds not her enemy—and he is not there—her mad fingers will seek the throat into which they sunk some time ago."

The detective left the place of concealment and sprang noiselessly after the Woman with the Silken Hand. She was already at the door, and her hand was on the latch when she found out that some one was near. She wheeled and faced the ferret; at the same time her hand sought and drew the dagger in her belt; but the sallow hand of Jaguar Juan caught the uplifted wrist, and while he held it, Mosco leaped forward, and the next moment the beautiful avenger of the desert was the prisoner of the two bloodhounds.

CHAPTER XXX.

WHO CAME UP THE LASSO?

A SINGULAR smile passed over Perdita's face. She bent forward and looked at her captors.

"Do you come between me and the man inside?" she asked. "Are you the sworn safeguards of the bandit-nabob of Arizona? Unhand me, and let me settle with my rightful prey."

But the grip of the two detectives only increased in power, and the Woman with the Silken Hand found that she was securely in their clutches.

"Come with us," said Jaguar Juan, dragging her from the step. "The hands you have must not find a victim in the nabob's palace. He is not there."

"Not there?" echoed Perdita.

"He is far from the house; he escaped some time ago, and you saw him not."

"Where were my eyes?" cried the woman. "He entered the house. He came as Captain Dagger, but in there he was Don Ramon once more. Ah, I do not tell you a secret; you and the Indian know."

The Yellow Shadower nodded. Perdita said no more; but went with the two men, and they drew her down to the edge of the camp, and their grip was loosened.

"You are bound to cheat me of my vengeance," said the woman, looking at Jaguar Juan.

"It is my trail as well as yours," was the reply.

"My claim on his life is better than yours," she answered. "He did not do you an injury; he struck me to the heart. I am the desert queen; I am the woman who years ago went over the waste, lashed to a horse, and followed by vultures, human and otherwise. He sent me on that awful journey; he did not tie me to the horse, but he watched one Gabriel, a devil in human form, do the work, and I saw him wave his hand to Gabriel to follow me until the vultures were ready for the horrid feast. He did this—the man called Don Ramon, and yet you say you have a right to him. Why was that crime committed? There were once two bandits of the Southwest border; they were brothers. The alcaldes of the day set prices on their heads; they stirred up the Vigilantes to hunt them like a pack of wolves, but they escaped them all. By and by it was rumored that both the brothers had been killed somewhere, and the hunt stopped. Neither had yielded up his life. One came to Centipede and became its nabob; the other found new happiness in the warm love of the woman who went over the desert with the vultures brushing her cheek with their wings. By and by he came to Centipede; his wife sent him to the nabob to ask for a tithe of the wealth he possessed, but he was met by a strangling hand, and on the mountain he sleeps as his murderer—as Don Ramon himself, and in the gold-bug's clothes. Now, Jaguar Juan, have you a better claim on this devil incarnate than Perdita, the wife of Gomez? Say that you have, and I will turn from my trail, and never avenge the dead or try to wipe out in Don Ramon's blood the memories of that ride of death across the desert."

Perdita stopped and looked searchingly into the face of the yellow ferret. The face of Mosco the Maricopa was a study. The Indian had folded his arms, and had listened to every word spoken by Perdita, but now he had turned to his friend the detective, and was waiting for him to speak.

"The trail is still mine," said Jaguar Juan. "I have sworn to go to the end of it, and that oath, witnessed by the fairest creature on earth, shall not be broken."

"But you swore to hunt down the band that strangled Don Ramon!" exclaimed the woman. "Don Ramon is not dead. He is the murderer, not the murdered. This renders your oath void."

"Nay, there is another oath," was the quick rejoinder, "one about which you know nothing."

"I do know," said Perdita, laying her hand on the detective's arm. "It is the one you took before you came to Centipede to wait till another million had been added to his wealth. You became the man who was bidding his time. All Centipede knew it—even the man you wanted. Don Ramon let you dwell in the midst of his slaves—in the shadow of the Tribunal, yet he never, by word or sign, let on that he knew your mission. You met him every day; you played with him in the den over yonder; you watched him as the cat watches a mouse of which she is sure. By and by your Indian friend came; he amused the pards of Centipede with his wonderful jugglery, and few thought that you two were sworn helpers."

Mosco's countenance lightened into a smile for the first time since the beginning of Perdita's narrative.

"Why did not Don Ramon play a death hand against you, Jaguar Juan? Has his failure to do this when he had fifty slaves at his command ever puzzled you?"

The detective did not answer.

"Don Ramon spared your life a thousand times during your espionage," she went on. "He had a score of traps at his command. He could have thrown you into the power of the Tribunal with Major Serafe at the head, but he held back his hand. Man, you waited too long. You let the prey get away from the net. I was on the trail all the time, but I wanted Gomez to come back with his report. He did not come because Don Ramon strangled him with his soft dark hand, and arrayed him in his gorgeous garments, hoping that you and your Indian would think him dead and go off."

"It was a pretty plot, sure enough," said the detective, smiling. "It was well played, too, and might have deceived us, but for the missing finger joint which made Mosco shake his head."

"It was poor Gomez's finger," said Perdita. "They were alike in form, all but that little mutilation. It caught your eye, did it?"

She had turned to the immobile Indian, and saw the eyes that now burned with triumph.

"Mosco had never seen a bad finger on Don Ramon's hands," said the redskin. "His eyes are sharp."

"I know that, and you have used them for Jaguar Juan," Perdita said. "You have been this man's second sight. Do you want him to cheat me out of my prey?"

"Mosco cannot be turned from his friend. He and Jaguar Juan work together."

The woman smiled.

"The man is as mercile's as his master—I thought so," she answered. "Well, I go back to my trail; you two may go to yours. Our trails will meet one of these days; they cannot help it. You knew I would not find Don Ramon in his palace, and you feared I would find the white throat of—ah, of whom, Jaguar Juan?"

She laughed as she spoke, leaning forward once more until her face almost touched that of the yellow ferret of Centipede.

"I was resolved that you should not repeat the fiendishness of your former visit," said the detective. "Failing to find Don Ramon, did you have to strangle the girl?"

"And get Dirrell, the American, into the net of the Tribunal? Ha, I did not think of it at the time. I saw in the girl the face of my enemy; I saw in her the form of the Nabob of Centipede, and in a moment I lived over that wild ride across the desert with old Gabriel, heartless devil, riding by my side, waiting till death to rob me. I won't repeat my clutch; no, I won't choke Juanita any more; but I will throttle Don Ramon with these hands!" and she held out for inspection the dangerous hands, at sight of which Mosco involuntarily fell back.

Half an hour after this strange interview a solitary figure went down over the rocky trail which led from Centipede on the west and among the deep shadows of the gloomy hills.

It was the figure of a woman, and she led a horse which every now and then put his nozzle affectionately against her cheek, and was for a moment fondly caressed. In this way Perdita of the Silken Hands went from the scene of her capture, and the hills swallowed her up and she was lost in their depths.

She had failed to find Don Ramon; she had also failed to draw the two detectives from the hunt so as to leave the whole field to her own vengeance, and now, having lost the Nabob of Centipede, she was alone again with her back turned to the gold camp, and was going out to other scenes, if not to the trail of the man who had escaped her.

She was not followed. Neither Jaguar Juan nor Mosco glided after her, though her parting words assured the pair that she would not quit the hunt—that should they find the nabob she would snatch victory from them, and in the end clear up the mystery of two lives and avenge the past with its desert ride and the murder in the palace.

This is why the Woman with the Silken Hand was not followed:

Three men were moving through a corridor so dark that it could not be elsewhere than under ground.

"I forced the truth from one of the six who helped the major," said one of the three. "Dirrell was brought into this place and left to the tender mercies of the little judge of the Tribunal. He has not showed up yet, which means that he is still here. The major has disappeared, but he can be found some other time. We want Dirrell now. I'm going to find him if I have to search every foot of this old den of darkness and death."

"What did the man say about its secret halls?" asked a voice that sounded like Jaguar Juan's.

"He could not tell me anything about them which I did not know," answered Manuel the big miner. "The old mine has been a mystery for years; it was such when Don Ramon first saw this region for the mine was worked by people who went to their reward years ago. It has chambers without any outlet; from the floor of some of them rise pillars of stone, and through one part of the mine runs a river whose waters resemble the waters of the ancient Lethe, inasmuch as they make no noise."

At last the exploring party struck some matches and pursued their way by the light of them. The matches revealed the faces of Manuel, Jaguar Juan and Mosco, the latter treading behind the others like a faithful dog, but with eyes and ears on the alert and his red hand resting on the hilt of a knife in his belt.

At length the three came to a spot where Manuel held his torch at his feet and proclaimed the discovery of foot-tracks. At the same time Jaguar Juan looked at the wall.

"From what I have heard of the mine the pillar dungeon must be near us," said the detective.

"It is. Look! the firelight shows the top of one of the columns," cried Manuel, and all pushed forward.

They saw the pillar of stone and its cold sides. Near it was another but not quite so high. The little party stood on the brink of the ledge that ran around the chamber, and Mosco suddenly snatched the torch from Manuel's hand and bent over it.

"Some one down there," said the Indian, looking up after a moment of gazing.

"It is the boy!" cried the big miner. "Uncoil your lasso, Mosco; we've found Dick, the victim of the plot."

The Indian straightened and began to uncoil the cord he carried at his waist. In a minute the task was done and in another he was dangling in mid-air along the side of the wall, the rope being held by Manuel and Jaguar Juan.

The torch fell over and went out, but they did not mind it.

After awhile Manuel and his companion heard a strange noise, then the rope was violently jerked from below, and a voice said:

"Pull!"

The two men on the ledge pulled with all their might; they heard some one scramble up over the top of the wall and bound away in the darkness.

Mystery stunned, they relighted the torch and looked down into the pit. The lasso was hanging inert along the wall.

"Somebody came up," said Manuel.

"Somebody, but who?" was the detective's response.

The big miner cast his flambeau into the pit, and both watched it breathlessly. When it struck they uttered a loud cry, for the fire showed them Mosco lying at full length on the ground.

CHAPTER XXXI.

CHITA CON MEETS HIS MATCH.

"The devil always helps his own," chuckled the man who ran down the narrow corridor which led to the mouth of the pillared mine. "It's an old saying, but a true one, for he helped me to-night. Who would have expected assistance from that direction? Helped out of the death-trap by Manuel, Jaguar Juan and the Indian! Well, it beats me; but I accept the help. I'm out, major. Chita Con's out of the mine-pit, so look out!"

The man who spoke thus went on, quitting the mine and going direct to Captain Con's shanty. He was opening the door when he heard an exclamation behind him and turned to greet Taos Jack whose eyes showed his surprise.

"You came back within the time mentioned in your letter," said the tough.

"In what letter? I left no letter."

"What? Major Serafe found one on your table signed with your name and—"

Chita Con had seized Taos Jack and pulled him into the house.

"Did it say that if I did not come back within twenty-four hours he was to take my place and be master of Centipede?"

"That's just what it said."

The dark hands of the overseer closed spasmodically.

"Where is the major?" he asked.

"I don't know. He went toward the palace after he read the letter to me and I haven't seen him since."

The escaped man desired to be left alone and Taos Jack went away.

"He's up to anything—the major is," said he. "It was a cool trick for big stakes. He wrote that letter himself—got it up to cover the point he wanted to make. If the three had not come to the mine in search of Dirrell, the American, the game might have won, for the cavern has no outlet. I would have died in the dark place with Felipe, the dead. But now I'm out again, and ready to play my best hand against them all. It was a close call, and I don't hanker after another like it. If I had not caught the Indian right, I would be there yet. It was by accident that my hands found his red throat, and when I had it, I didn't give him a chance for his life. Besides he can't tell Jaguar Juan and Manuel who came up the rope."

Chita Con, while he spoke, went over the thrilling adventure he had had in the depths of the mine. With nobody to keep him company but the dead, and with no outlet, he was on the point of despair when he heard voices which told him that men were overhead and then down the lasso came the slippery form of the Indian.

Of course the overseer of the nabob's millions jumped at the unexpected opportunity for escape which had come. He stepped to the wall and waited for Mosco, and the moment the red-skin touched ground that moment he had hands at his waist, and he was pressed against the wall and would have been jammed into the solid stone if Chita had possessed the power.

The big overseer while he recalled his experience wondered what had become of the three hunters as well as whether the little major had flitted after his escape. If he could have looked into the rat-infested chamber of another mine and seen the man who, tied to a chair and with a candle before him, was awaiting his fate, he would have hit the table with his bronzed fist and laughed for joy.

Let us go back to the three hunters in the old mine.

The escape of Chita Con was a mystery which stunned Manuel and the Centipede detective. They knew that some one had come up and run away in the dark, and they looked at one another several seconds completely puzzled.

The torch, still burning on the ground beneath them, revealed the motionless figure of Mosco and near him another form which moved not.

All at once Jaguar Juan threw his body over the edge of the wall and went down hand over hand. Manuel watched him while he kept the rope which had been made fast to the projecting rock in the rough wall from slipping.

The Yellow Shadow reached the bottom of the cavern, and bent over the red juggler.

"He's been throttled!" he shouted up to his friend above. "Mosco's still worth a dozen dead men," and he went over to Felipe and held the torch to his face.

"It is the cat, and he is dead enough," he cried. "Now, in the name of mystery, who went up the rope?"

"Send Mosco up and we'll ask him," was the answer and Jaguar Juan went to work to revive Mosco.

The Indian came back to life with provoking slowness, but he came back nevertheless, and when he could distinguish light from darkness he put his

hand to his throat, and, grinning, looked at the Mexican on the ground.

"It wasn't him," said the red-skin. "The hands were bigger than Felipe's."

"Is that all you know?" asked the detective disappointed.

The Maricopa nodded.

"Another mystery for us," he smiled. "We'll find Dirrell and then tackle it. Come."

Felipe was not disturbed, but Mosco looked at the swollen face long enough to make sure that the cat with nine lives had really given up the last one, then he sprang from the corpse at Jaguar Juan's call and went up the lasso first.

The search for Dirrell was now resumed. The three went to another quarter of the mine and stood on the bank of a sluggish stream which ran through the underground darkness. Their torch threw a weird light over the water, and revealed the place and the bats that flitted in every direction, touching them now and then with their black wings.

Suddenly the keen-eyed Indian fell back and grasped Manuel's arm.

"Look, the ghost of the mine!" he cried with chattering teeth.

The two whites bent forward and both saw at once the object that had drawn the cry from Mosco.

Something was moving down the bank not far off and almost in the water. Now and then it would slip and fall upon the stones and then rising come staggering on as before.

"It is Dick!" exclaimed Manuel, springing from his companions, and Mosco and the detective saw him seize the specter and come forward with it in his grasp.

Sure enough, the find was the American miner—the victim of Major Serafe's plot, but there was in his eyes a look which abs lutely frightened his beholders. Jaguar Juan held the torch close to the youth's face, and got what for a moment he thought was a stare of recognition.

It was evident that Dirrell had passed through some terrible adventures, but he was in no condition to tell them, and the hunters led him back over the ground they had traversed and held council at the mouth of the mine.

"He needs a woman's care," said Manuel. "My hands are too rough for him, and there ain't a woman in Centipede but Juanita."

"And she's mad," answered the ferret. "The palace would be the place for him with its comforts."

"To the palace he goes!" replied the big miner, resolutely. "I know his master now, but by heavens! he must yield to us. Chita Con, though nominally chief of Centipede, dare not say nay to me if I see fit to install Dick in the nabob's house."

Half an hour later the young miner lay in a deep sleep in one of the rooms of Don Ramon's house, and near him stood, with a singular look on her face, the beautiful heiress of the nabob's millions.

Juanita had appeared so rational and tender that Manuel had been content to withdraw and leave his protegee in her care, and now stood in his own shanty thinking over the events of the last few hours.

As yet he had not seen Chita Con, therefore, he did not know what effect the quartering of Dirrell in the palace would have on him. He knew, to some extent, the part the major had in getting Dirrell into the toils of the mine and he longed to confront the rascal and call him to account.

Manuel was quite alone in his cramped cabin. The light threw his brawny figure on the dingy wall behind him, and showed him to the man who, coming from toward Chita Con's shanty, stopped in the street and drew a revolver.

"As long as he lives to plot the prize will remain out of my hands," said the overseer. "Manuel is more to be feared than Jaguar Juan and his Indian. He is playing for Don Ramon's millions and for Juanita, as well. Didn't he fetch Dirrell to Centipede to grasp the two stakes for him? I'm not so blind that I can't see the fatal resemblance."

He walked down the street and came back again. His eyes looked on either side and saw everything. There was a light in the door of Jose's den and he could hear the rough voices of the midnight gamblers.

Breathing hard, he came back to the shanty—he always came back to it with a revolver in his hand—and saw Manuel in the same position, though now he held something like a locket in his hand and was gazing upon it.

"It's a picture—I wonder whose?" said Chita Con, curiosity making him forget for a moment his devilish intention.

He slipped on tiptoe to the window, and leaning forward, tried to see more. He saw a strange light in Manuel's eyes; they seemed to swim in tears, and while he looked at the object in his brown hand, something that shone fell upon it.

"I can find out in a second," said the overseer through his set teeth. "There's no one nearer than Jose's, and I can be in and out before the careless scamps bestir themselves."

He raised the revolver and pressed it against the glass; he put his finger against the trigger but something seemed to hold him back.

"If I let him off he'll crush me," he thought. "There will then come a time when I won't be Nabob of Centipede, and there's ten millions in this game."

This was enough. Captain Con pressed the trigger, but the hammer fell with a dull click!

Manuel, catching the sound, sprung erect and was at the door in a flash. He threw it open with one hand and looked out, with a six-shooter in the other. Spellbound as it were, stood Captain Con within reach of his long arms. The man had stopped to curse his failure to rid the world of Manuel.

It did not take the big miner of Arizona any time at all to grasp the situation.

One tigerish leap took him to Chita Con, and before the overseer could move a muscle in his own behalf he was Manuel's prisoner.

"You're convicted in your boots," spoke the miner. "Come into the shanty; I won't keep you, Captain Con."

The man of plots went into the cabin and stood sullenly in the light of Manuel's lamp.

"You want me out of your way," continued Manuel, smiling. "The six-shooter in your hand tells the story of attempted murder. You are not master

of Centipede, though the men believe you are. We have found my young friend, Dick. The mine gave him up, and he now sleeps in the nabob's palace."

Chita Con started so violently that the revolver nearly dropped from his hand. Dirrell in the palace, and so close to the heiress of ten millions?

"He remains there till I call him away," Manuel went on. "I shall hold you responsible for his safety, no matter what happens. You may have the men of Centipede at your beck, but the moment harm comes to Dick Dirrell within the limits of this camp, that moment Manuel shall consider himself at liberty to act, and no mercy shall be given."

Captain Con seemed to shrink from the man who uttered these words with a desperado's coolness.

In his whole career, Manuel was the only man he ever feared, and he did fear him.

CHAPTER XXXII.

FOUND AND LOST AGAIN.

ONCE more in the saddle and once more at large with the black mask over his face!

Captain Dagger cantered lightly across a small valley, looking now and then at the west, where the sun was setting in a halo of golden light. He had been to Centipede, had entered the house known as Don Ramon's palace, and had led from it to a dungeon of death the little man called Major Serafe.

"When the rats come from the holes in the wall he will scream with terror," said he, thinking of his victim. "He will wish he had never seen this accursed country, that we had never met, and that I had not accumulated a few thousands to tempt him! But he'll plot no more! I've crushed one centipede, and the others will follow in order!"

The bandit-nabob crossed the valley and entered the darkening shadows of the hills. He did not seem to fear pursuit by the person he should have feared most, the Woman with the Silken Hand! If he thought of her, he kept his thoughts to himself, and did not speak her name.

The day fled, and still the masked bandit was in the saddle. By and by he ascended to a lofty trail, and there drew rein. Below him lay the country he had just left, and far away he saw for the last time the dark clumps of bushes and groups of tall, spiny cacti.

He was silently contemplating this scene when his horse turned his head and acted as though his sharp ears had caught a suspicious sound.

Captain Dagger looked in the same direction, and laid his hand on his revolver.

"Halt!" he cried, spying a figure in the shadows. "Another step, and I'll send a bullet through your head!"

"The old captain!" exclaimed the man, rising and coming forward. "I thought so at first, and then again changed my mind."

"Gabriel!" ejaculated the bandit-nabob, recognizing in the man before him Gabriel, the human vulture of the desert.

Old Gabriel glided up to the mounted bandit with the movements of a wolf. He cast furtive glances around as he came forward, and when he halted he laid one of his evil-looking hands on Captain Dagger's leg, and looked up into his face.

"Did you see her?" he asked.

"Perdita? No. Is she on your trail?"

"No more on mine than on yours," was the reply.

"I lost her a while ago."

The nabob started!

"Is she in this part of the country?" he exclaimed.

"You don't mean to tell me that you have seen her in these parts?"

"I do, and that within the hour!"

The eyes behind the black mask were seen to snap for eagerness.

"Where did you lose her, Gabriel?"

"Down yonder," said the old man, pointing away.

"She rode like a queen—you know how she can ride, captain—and I failed to keep up with her."

"Was she alone?"

"All alone."

"Do you think we could strike the trail?"

"Two pairs of eyes are better than one," answered Gabriel. "If we could only run across her—if we could corner her in these hills, I don't think I need run from her infernal hand any more."

"Indeed you would not," assured the bandit, his eyes showing that his words were accompanied by a smile under the mask.

The two went down the trail in the direction pointed out by Gabriel, the old man walking beside the bandit's horse, and keeping his snapping black eyes on the alert. Night had fallen, but they had the light of myriads of stars to help them, and a certain silencing of the leaves told them that the moon would soon illumine the dark places.

Gabriel took Captain Dagger to the spot where he had seen the peon believed to be Perdita, the huntress. He got down and examined the ground then arose and confirmed his statement. The hoof-prints of a horse were visible in the trail.

There's no retreat for her in these hills, eh, Gabriel?" asked the bandit. "She must have a place somewhere."

"She's got one that I know of," was the quick answer. "She lives in a camp far to the south where she has a boy for a companion; but at the same time, she may have another place hereabouts. Gods! why didn't I make sure of her when I tumbled her from the saddle?"

"Or when you followed her across the desert, the Mazepa, and you a hovering vulture."

Old Gabriel grinned.

"Twice did I play fool," said he, showing his yellow teeth. "But the third time there shall be no mistake, captain. Let Old Gabe find her once more! He asks nothing better. I don't like to be running all the time from a woman who has been twice dead," and the speaker shrugged his shoulders.

They resumed their journey, passing over some rough ground until Gabriel stopped suddenly and clutched the masked man's wrist.

"Did you hear that boss, captain?" he asked.

"It's just around the rocks yonder."

At the same time Gabriel took off his hat and clapped it over the nostrils of Don Ramon's steed.

The bandit slipped from the saddle and drew his

revolver. The unmistakable presence of a horse in the close vicinity had been conveyed to him in the sound he had just heard, and the thought that he had found the huntress sent a thrill through his frame. The black horse followed obediently when the two men crept forward again, and in a little while both stood near where they thought the strange animal must be.

But they saw nothing. A deathlike silence brooded over the dark scene and not a leaf shook in the lazy breeze.

If a horse had been heard it was now quiet for a purpose, or had vacated the spot.

"Your eyes are better than mine in the night," said Captain Dagger to his companion. "They might discover whether a horse had been yonder. If so we can follow."

Gabriel would have shrunk from the task suggested by the bandit's words, but a look from the black eyes sent him forward, and the next moment Captain Dagger saw the dark figure of the old scoundrel gliding along on the ground.

The vulture of the sands went out of sight in a short time. He did not snap a single twig, though thousands strewn the path he crept over, and with a naked knife in his hand, and hoping that he might find Perdita napping, he pursued his way.

All at once Gabriel stopped and listened. He was near a heap of mountain boulders, and from over them a sound seemed to have come. Was the prey just beyond the stones? Had he but to glide forward to finish forever the persistent hunt of a desperate woman?

Eager though he was to commit a crime, the old rascal hesitated. He thought of the soft but deadly hands of his foe, and the captain's. He feared that he might miss the woman's heart, and the next moment feel her grip at his throat, choking out his worthless life. Then, at the same time, he thought, too, of the man waiting behind him. To go back to Captain Dagger was to show the white feather—to prove that he was a coward in the shadow of Perdita, his mortal enemy.

"Come life or death, I go on!" said Gabriel, finishing with an oath. "If she is there, I'll find her and finish forevermore the business between us."

He hugged the ground as he resumed the crawl. He felt every now and then the sharp edge of his dagger, and wondered in what position he would find the huntress. At last he reached the rocks. He dropped at the base of the heap and listened again. Not a sound could he hear.

After awhile he laid one hand on the stones, and was leaning over them to look beyond, when a chill swept to his heart, and he fell back uttering a cry of horror.

He had touched something as deadly as the soft hands of Perdita the Avenger—the cold head of a rattlesnake!

Old Gabriel, falling back, tripped on some loose stones, and lay half stunned on the ground, with icy sweat starting out on his forehead. He had dropped the knife, and thought only of the head he had felt among the rocks.

His cry sent Captain Dagger to his assistance. The bandit-nabob cleared many feet in the three bounds he made, and in a moment was bending over his friend.

"Did you find her, Gabriel?" he asked a tremor of humor in his voice.

"No, but I found her sister—a rattler!" was the gasping answer. "The pile is full of them."

"But they're not one whit deadlier than Perdita, the Huntress," exclaimed a voice which brought Captain Dagger to his feet.

Gabriel, too, frightened to get up, lay still, trembling like a criminal under the ax.

"I am here, woman!" said the bandit. "You know my voice if you can not distinguish me. I am here ready for the final combat. The hand that threw you off in the old hut will interfere no more, neither shall the man at my feet come between."

"Not now, Don Ramon, not now! A little while longer," was the reply he got. "I shall keep my vow. I shall close the game when I think it has gone on long enough."

"But you may be baffled by the Yellow Shadower," laughed the bandit.

"Jaguar Juan will baffle no one," said the unseen woman. "You need not fear that he will ever take you back to the dispensers of border justice. It is written in the books of Heaven that you shall die by the hand of Perdita, who rode at your command across the sands, with the vulture at your feet waiting for death to come that he might rob a corpse. Kick the coward upon his feet, Don Ramon. He shall touch something deadlier still ere long. I promise him this."

"For the sake of God, finish her, captain," groaned the man on the ground. "I feel her hands in my throat now. Don't let her get away to—"

Captain Dagger spurned the speaker with his foot and broke his sentence.

"You will not face me, eh?" he cried to the Woman with the Silken Hand.

"I have spoken; not now."

"When?"

"When I am ready to close the game, I say."

"Then, by the eternal heavens! you shall never close it," cried the bandit. "From this time on you shall have a shadow at your heels—a shadow from which you shall not escape. You have been my pursuer; you have sought me high and low because I sent you across a bit of sand with chicken-hearted old Gabriel to keep you company. The hunt has turned, woman. The tiger hunts the tigress, and time will show whose claws are sharper."

"I accept the challenge," came over the rocks.

"Take the man under your feet along for trailer and help. You may need the bound. I don't want to lose sight of him, for I have a soft hand for his long yellow throat."

There was a shudder at Captain Dagger's feet, and the bandit heard a groan of terror.

The last word died away and no more were heard. Old Gabriel got upon his feet and looked toward the rocks.

"I'm going this time for certain, captain," he said. "There's a cold hand at my throat now."

"Go, then!" cried the bandit, pushing the old desperado from him. "Go; but may you feel Perdita's hand there in reality before you die!" and Gabriel vanished down the mountain path.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

RIVALS FACE TO FACE.

CENTIPEDE had a new sensation. Major Serafe had disappeared!

While the little man had never been a great favorite, he was one of the camp's most prominent citizens, had originated the famous Tribunal which was known for its mercilessness, and was free with his money when he had any at his command; and the pards were not disposed to believe that the major had taken French leave and left the diggings.

Chita Con, who knew about the forged letter which Major Serafe had shown to Taos Jack shortly after the tragedy of the mine, was inclined to think that he had really departed, but just why he should do so, believing that he (Con) was still the prisoner of the underground den, was past his comprehension.

The major's absence was the main topic of talk in the gambling-den and on the street, and there were some who thought that Jaguar Juan and Mosco knew something about it.

In the course of a few hours a faction in favor of the lost man came forward with dark looks and some whispers against the detective and his red pard.

"They're saying that we know where the little man is," said Mosco, coming upon Jaguar Juan in the latter's shanty.

"Who are saying it?" coolly asked the ferret.

"The men who take the major's dust when he lays it on the tables. They say we took him off because he is the head of the Tribunal which might try us one of these days."

Jaguar Juan laughed.

"Well, the last seen of the major he was going into the nabob's palace. Who saw him come out?"

Mosco shook his head.

"Why don't they look there for him?" continued the detective. "Captain Con would like to find the little man with the pointed mustache. He wants to see the fellow who condemned him to the darkness of the mine without the formality of a hearing before the Tribunal. Where is Manuel?"

At that moment the bony figure of Manuel, Dirrell's friend, appeared in Jaguar Juan's door.

"Here I am," said the big miner, answering for himself. "Are you talking about the only thing talked about just now in Centipede—the major's vanishment?"

"We are," said the ferret. "Who knows when he came from Don Ramon's house?"

A singular smile seemed to settle over the miner's face. His eyes sparkled.

"If I wanted to strike his trail I'd begin there," said he; "but just now I have no particular interest in the major. I'm going up to the palace to see how Dirrell is coming on. He ought to have a good nurse in Juanita."

"Look out for Chita Con."

"I think we understand one another. I haven't seen him since I caught him at my window with his six-shooter in his hand; but we can't have a very long truce; it's against the natural order of things. One of us has got to go."

The Marico advanced and laid his red hand on Manuel's arm.

"Don't let it be you, brother," said he, smiling faintly. "We don't want you to be that one."

"I won't be if I can help it. I'm off now," and the next moment Manuel walked away, and the two pards saw his figure vanish toward the palace.

"To the trail now, and let Major Serafe find himself," said the Yellow Shadower to Mosco. "We must get beyond the camp. Our hunt is in the mountains. Captain Dagger is there."

"And the Woman with the Silken Hand," finished the Indian.

"Yes, and Perdita."

Mosco stole from the cabin and went toward the open door of the gambling-den. The lights were burning there, for it was the night after Manuel's meeting with Chita Con, and the usual gang filled the rough pine tables of the dirty place. The Indian contented himself with looking inside; he did not enter. After awhile he moved away, taking a last look which lingered covetously among the bottles on the shelves, but a few yards from the trap he stopped short and waited.

Presently there slipped from the door of the den a figure which came toward Mosco. It was seen by the Indian and was met by him with a look of recognition.

"I'm going off," said Mosco to the man, who was the youngest one in Centipede—a well-built fellow with clear blue eyes and not unhandsome. "You've kept the secret well, Sam. Jaguar Juan with all his cunning has not found it out. He does not know that Mosco has in camp another friend besides him; but he has you, Sam."

The man called Sam and Mosco walked to the confines of Centipede, and there stopped.

"The major went to the palace and no one saw him come out," said the Indian. "He is somewhere there yet."

"Do you think so?"

"Mosco is sure of it."

"Then Juanita ought to know—"

"She knows nothing," broke in the red-skin. "Mosco has been to the palace as Jaguar Juan's spy. He has watched Don Ramon when he thought no man's eye was upon him. Sam, he saw him go down into the ground from his own rooms."

"Into one of his mines, Mosco?"

"Into the ground," persisted the Indian.

"But why all this talk about the major? Why should I be interested in the lost man?"

"For what he knows," said the Indian.

"He's a mean, miserable skunk—the originator of the Tribunal. I don't care what becomes of him. Rats may devour him in the darkness of the mine and—"

"But they must not. He is a match for Chita Con; while he lives the big overseer will be employed," the Indian grinned.

"A foil to him, eh, Mosco?"

"Yes, Sam. I am going away. I shall take the trail and come not back until it has ended."

"Then you still believe that Don Ramon yet lives?"

"The missing joint, Sam!" cried the Indian. "Don Ramon's fingers were sound. He was not killed in the palace; the lost joint proves it. When we lift the mask of Captain Dagger we shall see

somebody's face. Yes, we shall know who was not strangled in the nabob's chamber."

The young man looked a little surprised, though his mien told that Mosco's theory was not altogether new to him. The Indian held out his hand, and the two exchanged good-byes. Mosco walked toward the hills, and Sam, after looking after him a few moments, went back toward the den.

"That wasn't time spent for nothing," said a voice, as a man rose from behind a rock near the place where the twain had stood. "So the last seen of the major was when he entered the palace, was it? And the Indian thinks he may be in a mine under the house. That recalls something—the disarrangement of the papers in Don Ramon's desk. I thought somebody had been among them lately, and they had been handled in a manner which at the time suggested the nabob's return. I know something about the mine under the palace. Gods! if I could but find my enemy there!"

Chita Con, the speaker, went toward the nabob's palace and entered.

Manuel had not yet entered the place, and the overseer knew nothing of his intended visit. He wanted to solve the mystery of Major Serafe's disappearance, and if he were in the mine it would be conclusive proof of Don Ramon's continued existence.

Chita Con, for a big man, had a tread almost as silken as a cat's. He stopped in the hall for a moment and looked toward Juanita's room, as if he thought of the young man who had been confided to her care by Manuel.

He was at home in the house. As Don Ramon's overseer, he had entered it at all hours; he knew every part of it from loft to cellar, and his prying eyes had made some discoveries which the nabob would not have relished if he had known of them.

"There is but one route," said Chita to himself, as he pushed forward. "I shall go to it like an arrow to the center of the target. If the little devil is there, I will find him."

He passed at once to the room where Don Ramon had lifted the trap-door when he had Major Serafe in his clutches. He found it without a match and opened it. Then he descended into the darkness beneath, pulled the door shut above him, and was gone.

Chita Con found the shaft-like place narrow and gloomy. He put his knife between his teeth and carried a revolver in his right hand while he felt his way with his left. In this manner he made good progress, and wound through the dark as readily as if he had the eyes of a cat.

Suddenly the overseer halted and dropped to the ground.

A ray of light lay along the floor which he had been treading for some time, and he put his face down to it and looked forward. At the same time he heard an unearthly screeching which brou lit him upon his feet, and he drew back with an ejaculation of horror.

"I've heard the varmints before," said Chita Con, moving on again. "There's a light in the old chamber, but the question is: Who's there? If the Indian has led me to the man who cut the lasso and left me to perish with the corpse of Felipe for a companion, there'll be a settlement before I go back."

He found in the dark what felt like a doorset in the wall which no eye could see. Feeling still further he found a latch of heavy iron, and as he rattled it, the sounds within grew still.

Chita Con had been to the place before. He knew that the door had no lock, and that he had but to press the latch to open it and see what was inside.

He waited awhile and then pulled the iron portal toward him. In an other second a light fell upon his face, but was not strong enough to blind him. It was the dim light of a guttering candle, and the overseer saw that it burned on the table in the middle of a small room.

But this was not all he saw. He beheld Major Serafe seated in a chair, the seal of terror on his ghastly countenance, and his eyes almost starting from his head. Chita Con nearly fied from the spectacle.

There was more of death than of life in the looks of his old partner, and when the first terror of the surprise was over, Captain Con crept across the floor and laughed in the face of the little Judge of Centipede's Tribunal.

He had snatched the candle from the table and was holding it so close to the major that the flame singed the handsome mustache which was his pride.

"Didn't I tell you there was an outlet to the pillared mine?" exclaimed the overseer. "Did you think you had finished Chita Con and won the game when you cut the rope? Fool! What's kept the rats back so long? Are you too tough for them? Ha ha, ha! I guess that's it!"

There was no answer. Major Serafe was looking at his rival and tormentor. He seemed to regard Chita Con as one risen from the dead.

"I guess I won't interfere," suddenly continued Con. "Don Ramon did his work well, and you're in a living grave. Let me tell you: Everything is moving just as I want it to move. I've just taken a new grip on the ten bonanzas and all that goes with them. Juanita is getting well. The huntress and Jaguar Juan are running a race for Don Ramon's head, Felipe is dead, and I shall make Juanita my wife within twenty-four hours."

A groan fell from Major Serafe's bloodless lips. "I don't think you will ever be Nabob of Centipede," Chita Con resumed, drawing back and setting the light on the table.

"Neither will you!" came through closed teeth.

CHAPTER XXXIV. DIRRELL'S STORY.

THE man who had sought the underground prison in search of his rival was moving back through the darkness. Chita Con had left the major to the doom to which Captain Dagger or Don Ramon had consigned him, and the rats could come from their holes once more.

There was a gleam of devilish triumph in the big overseer's eyes. He laughed to himself till the dark corridors rung with the sound; he thought he had seen the last of Major Serafe, and thinking thus, went his way and reappeared again in Don Ramon's palace.

He came up through the trap and stole off with-

out going into another to look after the welfare of Juanita or Dirrell, though he thought of both. He seemed anxious to get out of the house and when he found himself once more in the starlight, the overseer went back to his own shanty.

"The little major's safe enough," said Captain Con. "The rats have sniffed him and will see that he is taken care of. No more nice plots, major; no more cutting of lassoes in mines. You think that I will never be the so e Nabob of Centipede do you? Fool! If your ghost comes back to earth you will know more than you know now."

All this time Manuel was in Don Ramon's palace. He was there when Chita Con came out of the mine which was Major Serafe's tomb; he was listening to Dirrell's thrilling story of his adventures in the mine of the pillared chamber.

Thanks to Juanita's attentions, the young miner was convalescing, and Manuel was listening to the whole tale.

"I thought my end had come," said Dirrell, "when I found myself in the dark on the pillar. I heard Major Serafe slip away and his footsteps sounded in my ears like the knell of fate. It seemed to me that the pillar had no base, for I broke off several pieces and dropped them, but did not hear them strike. To die there was not to be thought of, not even by a desperate man in my condition. I resolved to make an effort to save myself. I had seen that there was a gulf between my pillar and the path which ran around the top of the chamber; Major Serafe's matches had shown me this, but I could not measure fairly with the eye. I again broke off slivers from the pillar and threw them in the dark at the ledge. Several fell short, but I increased the throw and heard them strike. Then I tried to calculate the distance. I am, you know, Manuel, a good jumper, but a leap for the ledge made my flesh creep at first."

"It was desperate," said Manuel.

"Desperate? I should say so," smiled Dirrell. "But it was the only chance. Well, I thought at last, from repeated experiments with the chips, that I had the distance pretty well calculated, and prepared for the jump, desperate as it was. I steadied my nerves and shut my teeth. It might be a fall to the bottom of the pillar where I knew a dead man would never be found. I called all my strength to my assistance, and sprang from the stone. For an indefinite time I seemed to be in mid-air, but all at once I struck a rock and the next moment was hanging stunned over the abyss. For a time I could not stir for the horror of the situation. I knew I had grasped the top of the wall and was holding on for dear life with the tips of my fingers as it were. I waited till my nerves, thrown out of gear, could be got right again, for to move without that precaution meant death. I finally began to pull myself toward the top, but slowly. I succeeded at last, completely overcome and half-crazed. Then came a journey through the dark with my head in a whirl, falling here and there to rise again and repeat the trick. I was insane. All at once I fell into a stream of water which closed over me. I was gone! I felt myself sinking beneath the sluggish tide and gave myself up for lost. From that time until I saw the gleam of your torch I knew nothing, and if you had not reached me when you did, I would have perished on the banks of the underground river."

Such was, in brief, the story heard by Manuel and Juanita from Dirrell's lips. The nabob's heiress listened with pity uppermost in her soft eyes, and Manuel, big and soft-hearted, drew his sleeve across his own black orbs.

He wondered if Juanita knew that Captain Dagger had been in the palace. He wondered, too, if she suspected what Jaguar Juan and Mosco had discovered.

When Dirrell had told his story, the girl looked at Manuel and left the room. The big miner followed her.

She led him to the apartment where stood Don Ramon's private desk, and there turned suddenly upon him.

A strange light lit up the depths of the young girl's eyes.

"I saw him, but I kept silent," said Juanita, pointing to the desk. "He came like a thief, with the dark mask on his face, but I watched him till he had looked over the papers in the desk. He would not let me see his face, but I knew he was Captain Dagger, the bandit of the mountain."

"Did he carry anything off?" eagerly asked Manuel.

"Some documents," answered Juanita. "He found them in the desk, and put them in his bosom. He was here a long time, and all the while he was busy."

"Did you see him all the time?"

The nabob's heiress shook her head. "I went away once to look after our patient," smiled the fair girl. "I was gone some time, and when I looked into this room again he was not here. I thought he had gone off, but all at once I heard the shutting of a trap-door, and lo! he came back to his work."

"From where?" asked the miner.

"There is but one trap-door, you know," answered Juanita. "It leads one down into the mine under the palace."

"And Captain Dagger knew of its existence? How do you account for his knowledge of it?"

"I cannot account for it," said the girl. "Never before, to my knowledge, has the bandit been under the roof of the palace. But he knew the way to Don Ramon's mine, for he had shut the trap-door in your room."

"Let me see it," said the big miner, eagerly.

Juanita was ready enough, and taking up the light, she led Manuel into another room, and pointed to a certain spot in the carpet.

"It is there!" she exclaimed.

"Is the mine the nabob's treasure-house?" queried Manuel.

"I don't know where he kept his money; he never let me into that secret."

"Then you have never attempted to ferret out the mysteries of the cavern beneath us?"

"I never have."

Manuel stooped and raised the trap, and gazed into the shaft by the light Juanita held for him.

"Not now," said he, drawing back. "I know where the place is, and it wouldn't yield me anything to-night. Some other time we will look into

its mysteries, if it has any, so now let's go back to the boy."

Ah, if Manuel had known what discovery awaited him in the heart of the nabob's dungeon—if he could have seen the guilty wretch lashed to a chair, and watching with starting eyes the rats that scampered over the floor of his prison, he would not have thought of going back to Dirrell. On the contrary, he would have snatched the light from Juanita's hand and disappeared down the hole.

Half an hour later Manuel was back in his own shanty, and Dirrell had dropped asleep, watched by Juanita, whose mind had come back to her, despite the terrible grip of the silken hands of Perdita!

Centipede seemed at peace with itself and with the world, but the rupture was at hand.

There crept from Chita Con's house, while Manuel sat in his own cabin, a man who would have been recognized anywhere as Taos Jack. He had not recovered fully from the drubbing he received from Mosco when the Indian threw him against the counter of the gambling den, knocking out his teeth and scarring him for life. The big villain wanted somebody's blood for the injury, and he wasn't very particular whose he got.

Taos Jack had been in close consultation with Chita Con. The two had put their heads together, and the overseer had told Taos a secret which had opened his eyes. This was nothing less than the supposed identity of Captain Dagger; for Chita Con was now convinced that the graveyard on the mountain slope did not contain the body of the nabob.

Jack was for telling all Centipede at once, but the overseer's hand and look had checked him.

"There's thousands in this for a few—nothing for many," said the big plotter. "We can work together, Jack, I'll share with you. All we have to do is to set several cunning traps and catch the right foxes. The chances are that the Woman with the Silken Hand will find Don Ramon and strangle him. It's a race between her and the twin detectives. The American is in our way, but we have him now in a trap, for the palace is such to all who know how to use it. Taos Jack, are you with me?"

The miner put his hand across the table and met that of Chita Con in a grip of alliance. Then the heads of the two men met again, and it was late when Taos Jack was released and permitted to steal to his own shanty.

He did not remain at home long. A sidelong glance at Manuel's window told him that Dirrell's friend was at home, and while he looked he saw the door open and the big miner come out.

"He caught Chita in the very act," said Taos Jack. "If the six-shooter hadn't snapped, there'd be another corpse on the mountain beside the bogus Don Ramon. Chita is right; there's millions in the game for a few—nothing for many. I'm one of the few. I'll watch Manuela a moment and see where he's going."

The big miner who walked toward the end of the camp had the shadow of Taos Jack at his heels. He went into the shadows that lay thick among the suburbs of Centipede, and disappeared in his own mine.

"Only going to look after his own affairs," said Jack to himself. "If I knew the windings of his mine, I'd be tempted to go in after him, but I never crossed the threshold of Manuel's claim."

Taos Jack went back and appeared at the bar of the gambling den of Centipede. He was lifting a glass to his lips when he heard a voice at his elbow.

"Have you any news of Major Serafe yet?" was the question he caught.

Jack started so violently that the liquor spilled over the dirty rim of the glass. Chita Con had told him all about the doom awaiting the little man in the rat-hell of Don Ramon's mine, and the sudden query went through him like a knife.

He looked and saw the young man who had accompanied Mosco to the edge of the camp; he gazed into the eyes of Sam.

"Holla Dos!" cried Taos Jack, catching his breath, "I'm not the major's keeper."

Sam laughed and Jack sat his whisky down untasted.

The occupants of the den at the time were mostly those who were anxious to know what had become of Major Serafe—men who preferred him to the big man who was ruling everything with a rod as merciless as the scepter of Don Ramon.

"I don't know where he is," said Taos Jack, looking at the crowd, as much as at Sam. "The man who says I do, lies!"

Sam colored to his temples.

"I say you know something," was the instant response. "Gentlemen, there stands a man who carries with him a secret which affects the major. I accuse him of knowing where the major is!"

Taos Jack ground his teeth and laid his hand on his knife, but the next moment he was covered by half a dozen revolvers, and his jaw dropped as he fell back to the bar.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE SHADOW OF EXTERMINATION.

MAJOR SERAFE'S adherents were in dead earnest, and Taos Jack, looking into the six-shooters that menaced him, wished he had not entered the ranch. But he was there and the question was: How am I to get out?

"What is he? What's the major?" came over the leveled weapons. "Tell us this instant, or by Jupiter! we'll play Tribunal without him for judge!"

The burly desperado thought of Chita Con, and his lip trembled. He did not like to betray the man who had just promised him a share in millions, but there were the revolvers, and at their triggers the dark, uneasy fingers of the best men in Centipede.

All at once one of the most active members of the mob sprang at him, struck aside the band he threw up, and in the twinkling of an eye he was in the grip of a half-dozen.

"Durn ye all," growled Jack, "now ye sha'n't have anything."

They pulled him toward the door, but some one suddenly shut it, and the following moment a rope was thrown upward to a hook which was fastened to one of the smoky rafters.

"That's never any foolin' in Centipede," said the leader of the crowd. "What's the major?"

Taos Jack looked at the rope, and then over the

broad shoulders of the men to the door. His few remaining teeth met firmly.

"The news had gone to Chita by this time," passed through Jack's mind. "If I can hold these devils at bay a few minutes, the tables will turn. Chita knows my value."

The big but agile hands of Colorado Carl were making a noose, and Jack saw his fingers somewhat nervously slip several times. Each slip meant a second of grace.

"Aren't you goin' ter tell whar the major is?" asked the head of the mob.

"Give a fellow time," answered Jack.

The mob laughed.

"Time ter make up a lie!" cried some one on the outside. "He knows, and should be made to spit it out without any grace. Pull 'im up an' ye'll git the truth before his toes leaves the planks!"

This suggestion was received with yells of delight, and just then Colorado Carl finished the noose and stepped toward the prisoner.

Jack fell back at sight of the noose, and at that same moment the door opened.

"Gods! in the nick of time!" mentally ejaculated the doomed man, for there stood in the door, double armed, for each hand gripped a revolver, the very man he had been praying for—Chita Con.

"Come to me, Taos Jack," said the overseer, and his six-shooters covered the men who stood between him and the new ally. "Gentlemen, you will stand back and not interfere with that man's movements!"

It was almost ludicrous to see how the adherents of the little major took these words. They fell back mechanically, but at the same time drew their weapons anew, but did not raise them. It was one to twenty, but the one had the best of the battle, and all knew that he was not playing an idle game of pistol-bluff.

"I shall count three," resumed Chita Con, "One—two—"

The crowd opened; Taos Jack put up his hands and pushed from his shoulders the noose which had settled over them; then, with eyes full of victory, he walked forward and joined his preserver.

"There can be but one master here, and that position belongs to me," said Captain Con. "I have stepped legally into Don Ramon's shoes, and those who don't want to ob y, can take the trail from Centipede. Don Ramon being dead, the millions fall to Juanita, and as her guardian, I am bound to defend our employees as well as the estate left by the late nabob."

"There is no late nabob," cried young Sam, Mosco's friend, and as he spoke he stepped clear of the crowd and confronted Chita Con. "I am prepared to say that the Nabob of Centipede does not sleep on the mountain."

Sam had every eye riveted upon him. He was not more than twenty six, was as straight as an arrow, and had the reputation of being absolutely fearless and firm.

"By Jove! this is rebellion, and you all know the code of Centipede," cried Chita, getting almost black in the face from rage.

"We know the code," responded Sam, waving his hand toward the men at his back. "This is rebellion, not against Don Ramon's authority, but against yours. We demand the restoration of Major Serafe. You know where he is—you and Taos Jack. Whether you know or not the secret which Captain Dagger carries under his mask and has carried there for years, makes no difference. Don Ramon isn't dead. The millions still belong to him and not to Juanita."

"Drop him!" said the scarcely moving lips of Taos Jack at Chita's elbow. "He started the game against me. He knows as much as he pretends, and a little rope will make him as dangerous as Jaguar Juan or Perdita."

"Move back," was the answer Jack received, and Chita Con faced the crowd once more.

"You will find us at any time," said he. "There should be no triggers between us for the good of Centipede. As for what the young man says, it is news to me. Prove that Don Ramon is alive and Chita Con will surrender his commission at once. Good night."

He did not lower his six-shooters until he had rejoined Taos Jack on the outside. His departure was not disputed; but the rebels looked at one another when he was gone, as if they wished they had stopped the pair.

"It's bad work," said Chita to his companion as they walked toward the overseer's shanty.

Taos Jack said nothing.

"Do you think the rats have finished him by this time?" he asked just before the cabin was reached.

"Yes, they have prevented Major Serafe from joining his friends. We must muster our men right away. Centipede is split. It is now man and man, and all because the rats have made a meal off the yellow Puss-in boots of the camp. I think we can outnumber them. Our friends weren't at the scene to night. Some how or other the boys went home earlier than common. What we have will stand by us to the end. Let's go in and canvass them."

The two men entered the shanty and put their heads together over the little table, and counted noses in the dark.

"Victory will make our position secure," said Chita Con. "It will seat us firmly in the saddle. We shall divide the millions of Don Ramon if the streets of Centipede run with blood. We have fifty-six who will fight to the bitter end."

"But where will Manuel go?" asked Taos Jack.

"And Dirrell, the American, too, eh?" smiled Chita Con.

"Oh they'll hang together, that's certain," was the reply.

"Yes, and mebbe by the same rope."

"And there's Jaguar Juan and his red-skinned ally."

Chita Con pushed his hand across the table and clutched his companion's wrist.

"We're going ter win over all," he whispered, hoarsely. "Why, man, there's too much at stake ter lose. The devil helps his own, and I guess we belong to him."

"Whose children are Sam and his pard's?" grinned Taos Jack, laughing aloud at the end of his sentence. "If we b'long ter Satan, who will claim the other crowd?"

"Death will," grated Chita Con. "Come now.

We must muster our forces. This thing must be fought out. The man who falters will be killed by the leader he deserts. We have fifty-six, the enemy forty-three all told. With them the issue is the return of Major Serafe; with us it is the ten millions of Don Ramon."

Chita Con stood erect, looking at Taos Jack in the little light that stole in at the window.

"Don't you accept the challenge?" he went on. "Are you ready to humor the mob and miss the gold of Centipede?"

"No."

"To work then! Before Jaguar Juan and Don Ramon can turn up—before the Woman with the Silken Hand can come back, we must settle this rebellion. There must be the swiftest work ever seen among these hills. It must be merciless and sure. I have never had a chance to show Centipede what I am made of. I haven't played tiger since coming into these parts. I want to go back to something like old times. Now is the time for me. Go from hut to hut and call the boys to the council chamber in mine 'Number Ten.' Do it well; let no spy follow you. I will be there. Eternal vigilance is now the price of millions."

A minute later Taos Jack was flitting like a shadow from shanty to shanty. He did not abide long at any one, but long enough to tell the inmates that a crisis had arrived, and that Chita Con awaited them in "Number Ten."

As he turned from the last shanty he heard a step and looked over his shoulder to see in the shadows the tall and giant-like figure of Manuel. Had the miner followed him? Had he played spy all the time?

Taos Jack lifted his revolver but suddenly lowered it. A shot would alarm the camp.

"We'll net him with the rest," he said to himself. "Dirrell and his big friend shall perish with the others. To shoot him where he is might injure our plans," and he passed on, leaving Manuel standing under the stars looking toward the nabob's palace where lay one who was very dear to him.

The pards came together in the depths of the old mine. In the light of torches stuck in the wall Chita Con faced the spirits on whom he could depend and told them of the crisis that had come.

"They say Don Ramon lives," cried the overseer. "It is a lie to strengthen the rebellion. We carried him to the mountain and buried him. We must crush or be crushed. It is with us a struggle for existence."

And while the desperadoes of Centipede—the fifty-six—stood up in the council-chamber and swore to smite swiftly and spare not, there was approaching the camp a hand which was to play a terrible part in the last act of the exciting drama.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE FATAL CRAWL.

A CRESCENT hanging in the sky was casting across the leaden ground of a little valley the long shadows of the sentinel cacti.

The spot was not very far from Centipede, as distances go in the far western country, and the moon, creeping to her highest position among the fleecy clouds that drifted lazily over the scene, seemed to smile upon the desert-like aspect.

Riding leisurely across the valley, having entered it at one corner, was a woman who sat half-wearily in the saddle and hardly touched the reins belonging to her steed.

Every now and then she would look up and take a survey of her surroundings only to drop back into the lethargic-like condition which seemed to hold her in thrall.

"I should have struck when I had him in my power," she said, addressing herself aloud. "I had two of them there at one time—the master and his old server, Gabriel. Now I have lost both. The one is somewhere in these parts, but the old hound has probably sought another kennel. I'm nearly tired of the hunt," she sighed wearily. "I am sick of hunting all the time for the opportunity which my oath desires. If I could find him now I would settle the feud and cheat Jaguar Juan and his Indian ally."

She rode a little further on and then drew rein in the shadow of a clump of the spiny plants that dotted the valley. In another moment she had slipped from her horse and taken a nicely-rolled blanket from behind the saddle. Spreading this on the ground where it was free from spines, she prepared to rest a while.

"I need rest," she went on. "My strength is not what it used to be. I am not the woman who took the oath of vengeance when I came back to life on the desert with the vultures flying from their expected feast with bloodless beaks. I am no longer Perdita, the Woman with the Iron Grip. My strength is waning. But I have enough left to throttle the foe—enough left to make Old Gabriel's tongue pop from his mouth—to make his eyes dance the devil's hornpipe in his head; ay, strength enough for that!"

She lay down on the blanket and held the lines so that her head could wander a little way and crop the poor grass that grew among the cacti. Her eyes were bright and full of expression, and while she reclined on the ground she watched the moon, and now and then smiled as if the watching brought back memories which were pleasing to her.

"I shall go back to the trail to-morrow and quit it not until I have reached the end. I want to try these hands of mine," she held them before her face and opened and shut them admiringly. "They are the avengers of the dead and the beagles of the living. They shall fasten upon two threats, and then Perdita will bid farewell to the long hunt for the guilty."

She closed her eyes and seemed to fall into deep thought. She suddenly caught sight of a tiny flower which bloomed at the edge of the blanket, and darted upon it like a hawk upon a dove. It seemed to remind her of the past, for she pressed it to her lips and sighed.

All this time there was moving across the valley a shadow that was not the shadow of cloud or cactus.

It resembled the shadow of a panther moving stealthily upon her prey, and it was headed for the woman who lay on the blanket, caressing the little flower she had plucked.

Every now and then the crawler halted. He kept his eye on one spot, and that was the group of cacti where the Avenger lay. In figure he was long, slim, and wiry. His face was as dark as the ground over which he crept, and his hands, which were put out like paws, were of the same color.

"I won't fail this time," he said, speaking through his teeth. "I must silence her, or feel the hands she owns at my throat! If I run away I will have her at my heels! I can't escape her as long as she lives, and the only safe way is to beat her at her own game. Don Ramon hoped that I might find her fingers in my flesh when I left him at the heap of rocks where I put my hand on the head of a rattler. But it shall be the other way this time. I have the death call on the woman with the silken trumps. I have her at my mercy, instead of being at hers!"

The crawler saw nothing but the woman on the blanket. Hawk-like, he watched her with all his might, and counted the inches which he covered as he approached.

Old Gabriel had changed his mind. The sandy vulture of the desert had found the trail of his foe, and he had resolved to end the fear he had of her by strangling her with his own hands. He had robbed her on the great waste south of the Arizonian border, but she had escaped alive from her Mazeppa ordeal; he had shot her from her saddle, but she had recovered to hunt him again! Now there should be no shooting; now his hands would finish the job, and he would not break their grip until the hand which he dreaded was as harmless as a dead babe's!

Gabriel revolved these thoughts in his mind while he approached the unsuspecting woman. His hands fairly itched to grip her throat; he felt like bounding up and running to his prey, but restrained himself with a mighty effort.

The crawl of old Gabriel was like the crawl of a cat. Felipe would have made the same sort of crawl if he were living and at the same business; but Felipe would never play another hand, thanks to Major Serafe's little game.

Old Gabriel came nearer and nearer to his victim. He saw the shadows of the cacti, and saw, too, that Perdita's horse was so intent on getting a little sustenance from the poor grass as to be oblivious of his presence.

A few feet separated the enemies at last. Gabriel pressed the ground and halted for his last breath. He had accomplished the distance in safety, but it had taken him an hour to crawl two hundred yards.

He saw Perdita cast the flower from her and look to the west. How fortunate! If she had turned her head the other way she might have caught sight of him. Surely the purveyors of good fortune were playing a hand for him!

At last Gabriel was near enough. His breath came not at all, and his heart stood still.

He looked upon Perdita as in his hand, with those black eyes of hers starting from her head, and her beautiful face turning black in his grip.

He made ready for the spring. Before beginning the death crawl, he had discarded every bit of superfluous clothing; he had stripped himself as a wrestler does before he enters the arena, and his skin shone like polished chocolate in the light of the moon.

All at once Gabriel gloated for a short second on his prey on the blanket. His shadow fell behind him, and not across Perdita to warn her of the vulture so near at hand.

"At last!" cried Gabriel, springing forward like an impetuous tiger. "The blanket shall be your shroud my pretty demon!"

He descended upon Perdita like a thunderbolt with the last word. His hands came down in unison and the woman as she turned found them buried in her throat.

"I am going out of the country but you are not to follow me," he laughed in her face. "Ah, you know old Gabriel, the vulture of the old-time desert. I don't have to tell you who I am. No, no! Now, what do you think of strangling Gabriel with your soft silken hands?"

His laugh was the laugh of a fiend, and he bore her back upon the blanket, forcing her head into it until it seemed to lose itself in the loose folds.

Perdita had answered him nothing. Her look was more than enough, and it told old Gabriel that he had captured the bane of his life.

Deeper and deeper sunk his hands into the soft flesh of the Silken Hand. He had her completely at his mercy. His long crawl had not been for nothing; he would creep across the desert for the present moment.

But suddenly teeth which sent a thrill of horror through his whole frame seemed to close on his own neck. Perdita's horse, faithful animal, had come to the rescue!

The struggle on the ground had aroused him, and he sprang to his mistress' assistance. With a singular sound he had seized old Gabriel by the neck, that part of his frame being nearest at the moment, and his teeth were trying to meet near his jugular.

A chill of terror seemed to paralyze the old scoundrel. He could not turn his head, but he knew what had caught him, and in a minute he was being pulled back by the horse; but he did not release the throat of his foe.

It seemed to Gabriel that the black steed was pulling a handful of flesh from his neck, that already the tendons were yielding, and the vertebra becoming unjointed.

He looked at Perdita, and seeing what he thought was a smile of victory on her face, tried to hold on, but it was simply impossible. The horse would have pulled his head from his shoulders if he had not relaxed his grip.

He let go and fell back to dangle in mid-air for a moment from the animal's mouth. His senses were leaving him; his brain swam.

He saw Perdita lift herself from the blanket; he saw her come toward the horse, and when she spoke he fell down, down—it seemed to him that he would never quit falling, though he had only dropped to the ground.

How long he lay there in darkness, old Gabriel did not know. When he came back to life the moon had changed position and the shadows of the cacti were longer than ever. But, there was over him a shadow which was not that of a bush.

He would have sprung to his feet with a yell of horror if he had had strength enough, but the cry he did let out brought the shadow nearer, and he

looked up into the eyes of the Woman with the Silken Hand.

The crawl had failed; the long creep through moonlight and shadow had been the lure into a death-trap; and he and not Perdita was to appear first at the Judgment Bar of God.

Old Gabriel looked up into the woman's face and watched it intently. He never saw the eyes shine as they shone now. If they were a woman's eyes once, they had been transformed into a basilisk's. They were eyes without mercy.

The horse stood near, looking down upon the man whose desperate deed he had balked. Gabriel knew that the pair had watched his coming back to life.

Should he beg? Should he ask this woman to spare him? He knew a secret which might be of service to her; he knew the mountain retreat of Captain Dagger, *alias* Don Ramon. Could he not sell it for liberty?

The thought sent his blood like lava through his veins. Don Ramon's wish had come true. The hands of Perdita were at his throat.

All at once the eagle descended upon her prey. The silken hands came down upon Gabriel without warning; they closed at his waist; they sunk into his yellow flesh, and he thought even then, when he knew he had but a few moments to live, how wonderfully soft they were.

Perdita's lips spake not a word. She bent over the man on the ground and pressed her knees into his chest. He saw the moon dance in the sky; it was dark and light alternately. The hands were truly hands of silk. It was a pleasure to feel them even where they were, but it was—death!

By and by there rode across the little valley a woman who looked not once behind. If she had she might have seen something dark lying on the ground—something which had a human shape, but which lay, perfectly still—ready for the vultures which would come at dawn.

She kept on until she entered the hills beyond the limits of the valley; then she turned her steed's head toward the north and spoke aloud five words:

"One! Now for the other!"

Then she touched her black horse's flanks with the spur, and went off like an arrow toward Centipede.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CAPTAIN CON'S TRUMP.

THE new day came, but the storm did not break. A strange, inexplicable truce seemed to have intervened between the two factions of Centipede.

Manuel came out of the nabob's palace with a smile on his face.

Dirrell was mending rapidly, but the big miner had decided that he should remain where he was a few days, if nothing occurred to prevent, for Juanita was a good nurse, and she would soon bring him back to himself.

Manuel, during the day as it crept away, wondered when the clouds would open and let out the elements with which they were charged. He knew all about the scene at Jose's den; he had heard how Chita Con had interfered in time to save Taos Jack's neck, and, if questioned, he might have told something about the secret meeting of the fifty-six in the mine.

It was "dagger eyes" all that day in Centipede. The least thing was liable to explode the mine between the two factions, and set them on each other, and the big miner wondered why it did not come.

"This night will be big with events," said he, when he saw the sun disappear behind the mountain graveyard where rested the body of the man wrongly called Don Ramon. "It may settle the fate of Centipede and the millions of the nabob."

If he could have known of the crawl of Gabriel through the little valley—if he could have seen the victor riding toward Centipede, as if fate, with unerring hand, were guiding her—he would have whispered more than he did to Dirrell.

Night came. Its wings darkened the scene, and threw a shadow over the landscape. Manuel, as a matter of caution, looked at his revolvers, and then turned his gaze toward the palace. Major Serafe had not yet been found, but the forty-three had not given him up. They were ready to swear—every one of them—that Chita Con and Taos Jack knew where he was, and—

Hark, there are sounds of hoofs on the stony trail which, if followed long enough from Centipede to the south, will bring the trailer to a certain little valley where lie scattered a lot of freshly-picked human bones.

Manuel hears the sounds, for he has gone to the edge of the camp, and now he draws back into the shade of some small trees and watches.

Presently the horse and his rider come in sight. "Heaven!" cries Manuel. "I would have guessed it, for something told me who it was."

The horse passes within a few feet of the miner, and he sees the well-poised figure and the black mask.

Captain Dagger; no, Don Ramon, for nearly all Centipede knows or suspects the truth! Manuel looks at him till he vanishes toward the main camp, then he springs forward and enters the palace before the nabob can reach the front door.

"He has come back," says Manuel, bending over Dick, who has been enjoying Juanita's company, for she has just told him the story of her life, as she knows it.

The young man looks startled. "He must not find you here," continues Manuel. "We will go down into the mine. Come."

Ready to obey the man to whom he owes his life, Dirrell leaves his chair and Manuel conducts him to the trap leading to the mine under the palace.

"You are not afraid, Dick?" asks the miner.

"No. I know what mines are," he smiles back to Manuel, says "good-by," and the trap is closed over him.

Manuel turns back to Juanita, who, wondering what has happened awaits him in another room. It is his intention to meet Captain Dagger alone, and he advises the nabob's heiress to go to her own chamber.

"I shall know by and by, shall I not?" she asks.

"By and by," answers Manuel, and the girl is gone and he is alone in the palace awaiting for Don Ramon, who has come back to Centipede.

Manuel goes to the room with the desk and conceals his large figure behind a heavy cloth which hangs across one corner. As he does so the door opens and he sees not Don Ramon but Chita Con. He did not know that the overseer was in the house.

The dim light burning in the apartment shows Manuel the well-knit form of the plotter, but not for long, for after a hasty glance around, Con moves into another room, but leaves the door slightly ajar.

Minutes seemed hours to Manuel. Had Captain Dagger gone on, and was the vigil in the palace to be for nothing?

No, the door watched so intently, slowly opened, and the man behind the curtain saw the masked figure of the bandit-nabob.

Captain Dagger came in with stealthy step and sidelong look. He seemed to take in the whole room at once. Manuel saw him go to the desk and throw back the lid, then he seated himself at the table and spread some paper before him.

And now the door which had opened for Chita Con, opened again. It sent forth no noise, and the step which stole across the carpet did not rouse the nabob.

Manuel felt a thrill permeate his whole frame. He saw the sneaking giant, saw, too, the flash of his eyes as he advanced across the room upon the nabob, and expected to see him spring upon Don Ramon and hurl him from the chair.

"Well, captain?" suddenly said Chita Con, and at sound of his voice Don Ramon turned like one shot and looked up.

The next moment eye was looking into eye, and then Captain Dagger's figure began to straighten and eventually stood erect before the overseer.

"I know you," said Chita Con, covering him with his finger. "The black mask can hide your identity no longer. You are Don Ramon, the hunted bandit of years ago and the strangler of the man who died in this chamber and who sleeps on the mountain in your garments. I have but to speak and finish the career of the man whose head still is worth a good price on the southern border—the man for whom Jaguar Juan waited so long to miss at last. Ha, ha, a well-played game, Don Ramon, and say that I do not hold the best trumps."

The look of two cold eyes was all Chita Con got in reply. The hidden lips of the cornered bandit were silent.

"You don't answer me," continued the overseer, contemptuously. "Didn't you bring your tongue with you? Or did the Woman with the Silken Hand deprive you of it on the trail?"

At mention of his persistent trailer Don Ramon started visibly. He fell back to the chair, but recovered as suddenly as he had started, and his form was as straight as an arrow once more.

"The men are mine!" Chita Con went on. "They are ready to hang the master who has masqueraded as a bandit robbing them of their dust and adding to his own millions as nabob. You have lost Felipe, your yellow cat; you have come back into a trap of your own setting. It is true that Perdita may be far off just now, and that Jaguar Juan and his red ally may not be within reach; but your peril is just as deadly. You are in my hands. I have but to speak and the double-faced master of Centipede goes into the clutches of a Tribunal as terrible as the one that Major Serafe used to run."

"Where is the major?"

It was the first sentence that Don Ramon had spoken, yet, why had he spoken it? He knew where the little major was, or where he had seen him last. Perhaps he wanted to discover if Chita Con had found the lost judge-advocate of the camp.

"Major Serafe is where you left him," laughed Chita Con. "Forty-three men want the blood of the man who took him to the realm of the rat; fifty-six more are ready to avenge the death of the murderer of the palace."

Captain Dagger seemed to make a mental calculation. Fifty-six and forty-three are ninety-nine, the complete census of the pards of Centipede.

"There is a way out of this trap," said Chita Con.

"Ha, a way out?" echoed the unseen lips, as if their owner was grasping at a straw.

"You can save yourself, but must play fair," resumed the overseer.

"Name the terms."

"There's paper on the desk. Write your will; continue to be dead to Centipede. Take with you of your treasure all that you can carry on your horse, but leave the rest to Juanita on one condition—that she becomes the wife of Chita Con."

Manuel, who was looking into the eyes behind the mask, thought he saw them flash.

"Date the will back two weeks," continued the giant. "You can then go away and eventually escape the bounds of vengeance and justice."

"What if I refuse?"

"Then I speak. I am master here; fifty-six against forty-three and the fifty-six the tried desperadoes of a thousand frays. I know the history of Juanita. I am playing for the biggest stakes in Arizona; so was Major Serafe, but he has lost. You can't fight Jaguar Juan and the Silken Hand with me against you. Why, the palace is now surrounded. We have prepared for your coming. There's a face at the window now. I have but to make a sign and your game is played out. Do you want to triumph over Perdita at last, or do you prefer the rope of Centipede?"

"I will do the one and escape the other," cried Captain Dagger.

"You?" laughed Chita Con. "Fool! You are in a trap as deadly as the one which holds your last victim, the little major."

The next move almost lifted Manuel from the floor. The bandit-nabob went at Chita Con like a thunderbolt, but the big man was prepared for something of the kind, for he met him with the firmness of a rock, and catching his hands in mid-air held them there while they looked into each other's face.

"I make no will for you," said Captain Dagger. "I will come back to my own when there shall be no one on my trail. The Silken Hand will have been picked by the vultures; the corpses of Jaguar Juan and his juggling Indian will shrivel in the sun, and the millions of Don Ramon shall increase until—"

The sentence was never finished for the door to the right was burst open and something human-like

though terrible of aspect fell into the room with an unearthly yell.

"My God! Major Serafe!" cried three men at once.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

OVER THE LAST TRICK.

THE apparition falling across the room dropped into the chair lately vacated by Captain Dagger, and looking at the two men, laughed like a fiend.

The bandit-nabob was the first to recover.

"You see Major Serafe is not where he was left," said he to Chita Con.

"No, the little devil has outwitted your rats and is here to take part in the game. But I'll attend to him, Don Ramon. Let us go back to the compact."

"To the will?"

"Yes, that is the compact."

Don Ramon looked at the horrible object in his chair and then turned to Chita Con again.

"I make no bargain with you," said he. "We will test the loyalty of the fifty-six."

The dark eyes of the overseer seemed to emit sparks of fire. It was evident to him that the coming of Major Serafe had lost him his play.

"If the time for unmasking has come, I accept it," continued Don Ramon, and tearing off the black mask he flung it from him and stepped toward the main entrance. "I can come back to life with the same ease with which I became Captain Dagger. This house is mine. Go out and call together your men, if they are yours. I am ready to fight fate to the hilt of the knife. Not an inch of ground will I yield to you. Go!"

The right hand of the nabob pointed to the door, but Chita Con did not stir.

"I am in dead earnest. I want this point of supremacy settled before the Silken Hand comes back."

"Ah! you look for that hand, do you?"

"I look for it," and an eager smile wreathed the proud and bloodless lips of the nabob. "Go and summon your men, I say! Tell them that I am here! Say that the Nabob of Centipede, the man who made them what they are, has come back to his own. I will take care of this man," he pointed at Major Serafe, dazed in the chair. "I took him to the rats because he wanted to play a game similar to yours. Didn't I, major?"

The eyes moved; a grim smile appeared at the mouth of the little man, but he did not speak.

"Then there is to be no compromise?" asked Chita Con, with the voice of one who believes that he cannot be cheated out of the victory he is playing for.

"No compromise with traitors!" said Captain Dagger.

"Then, war!" was all the overseer replied, and the next moment the door had closed upon his giant figure.

For a moment Don Ramon stood and looked closely at the man in the chair. He seemed to have doubts as to the major's condition. Was the apparition flesh and blood, or some frightful being from the dead?

He strode toward it at last and bent nearer. He saw the eyes roll and the jaws fall apart. It was alive!

"So you outwitted the rats, but not until they tried their teeth on you!" grinned the nabob. "A little longer, and they would have finished you! In God's name, how did you escape?"

Major Serafe got upon his feet; he clung to the sides of the chair with his bitten hands and looked at the nabob, who fell back with a gasp of horror.

"The American came to me and cut me loose," said the little man.

"The American?" repeated Don Ramon.

"Ay, the man I left on the pillar in the old mine," laughed the other. "Did you repent and send him to me? No, you would not do that; but he came, just the same, and I felt his knife at the ropes the infernal rats had gnawed nearly through. I am still Major Serafe, the judge of the Tribunal, and I shall organize my court at once."

"For whose trial?"

"For yours, for one," cried the major, advancing to the desk and striking it with his bleeding fist.

"After you shall come Chita Con, and then my other enemies in detail. Oh, I am the power here, if the rats have left their autographs on my person. I shall be nabob when the Tribunal has settled with you all. To work, to work! Stand off, or, by the enduring heavens! I will bite you, and the bite of a man with poison in his veins is death!"

Captain Dagger fell back from the man who stepped toward him as he shouted the warning, and the major, with another laugh, full of demonism, crossed the room and vanished—the most terrible being that ever entered the Arizona palace.

"So Dirrell, the young American, saved him?" said Don Ramon to himself, and aloud. "Where is he? I sent Felipe once to find him in the depth of the pillared mine, for with him I wanted to baffle Chita Con, and not because I had any love for Manuel's friend. Now he brings Major Serafe back from the realm of the rat and gives to Centipede a madman. The last trick is before us; we have gathered the cards for the last encounter. Who shall lose? Don Ramon? No!"

Manuel, who had stood spellbound behind the curtain in the corner, saw the nabob close the desk, but the next moment he tore the lid open again and sat down before it. He seized some paper, dragged it before him and wrote rapidly and in a large hand.

"A proclamation for the board," thought Manuel, and then his mind went out to Dirrell. "Where is Dick? If he freed Major Serafe, why hasn't he come back from rat-hell?"

He longed to rush to the trap in the floor and go down into the mine on hunt of Dirrell, but the presence of the man writing at the desk held him back.

Don Ramon wrote for some minutes, then threw the pen aside and got up. He held in his hand a document which contained some lines traced in large characters, and he held it at arm's length while he read it aloud.

It was a proclamation to the men of Centipede reciting that traitors were in camp, that the millions of Don Ramon were to be seized; and it called upon all who respected his authority to rally round him, and put down treason.

"I post this with my own hand," said the nabob. "This is a fight to the death!"

He went out, carrying the proclamation, and Manuel sprung from the room and ran to the trap. Throwing it open he plunged into the gaping hole and disappeared.

Meantime Don Ramon had left the house. He crossed the space that intervened between the palace and the public bulletin board, and halted in front of it with his proclamation. But all at once he saw that something was fastened to the board, and he leaned toward it with an oath.

Some one had been ahead of him; there was a paper on the board.

"It's pretty hard to outstrip a devil like Captain Con," said the nabob, "but the top proclamation counts."

He struck a match and looked at the paper before him. It was very brief.

"TO THE MEN OF CENTIPEDE."

"Don Ramon, who is none other than Captain Dagger, the outlaw, has come back. His hands are stained with the blood of his twin brother, Don Gomez, who sleeps in the murderer's clothes on the mountain. We must unite to punish the deception of the past, and to resist the outlaw and assassin. The millions of Centipede belong to the men who made them. The assumed death of Don Ramon made me master of Centipede, and I assume full powers in face of the crisis. Rally for the suppression of murder and the death of the outlaw! Let those who falter be regarded as the foes of justice and order."

"CHITA CON,
Master of Centipede."

A half-contemptuous smile came to the lips of Don Ramon while he read, but he chased it away and posted his own document over the one fresh from Chita Con's hands!

Looking at his work, he fell back and walked off.

Not far away a man stood in the doorway of a shanty watching him.

"He accepts the challenge," said this person. "I am glad of it. Now we shall try our strength."

What had become of Major Serafe? Had he been found by those who pretended to be his friends for the purpose of deposing Chita Con, or had he staggered to his cabin, there to succumb to the poison which had found its way into his blood through the teeth of the vermin of the mine cell.

He was at home once more, but not alone. The little man of Centipede had been helped into the shanty by a person who saw him staggering toward it, and the mad black eyes were looking into the face of Jaguar Juan, the Yellow Shadower.

"You will find him at the palace," cried the major, clutching the detective's sleeve. "He is there with Chita Con, the plotter—the man who is worse than a thousand vultures. You must be quick. You waited a little too long before, you know, ha, ha! Did she come back with you? Is she in at the death?"

"I don't know where the Silken Hand is," answered Jaguar Juan.

"Quick, quick, or she will step between!" the major went on. "Let me go out and muster the forty-three. You see what they did?" and the bitten hand of the man tried to twist the pet mustache, but there was none to twist. "They bit it off," he ended with a grin.

Jaguar Juan saw the man fall back upon the bed and turned away.

As he reached the door and pulled it open, a figure flitted past, and the next moment he had called it back.

"She has come!" said Mosco, laying his hand on the detective's arm. "The Woman with the Silken Hand is here."

"In Centipede?"

"In Centipede!"

"Tartarus open for her!" cried Jaguar Juan. "There must be no failure now. If we lose our prey I shall never take another trail. Where is she?"

"Yonder."

The finger of the Indian ferret pointed toward the palace, and the next moment he had turned to his friend again.

"Do you mean that she is near the nabob's house?"

"She is where we caught her once among the little trees."

"Come, then!" exclaimed Jaguar Juan. "The man in there is at the end of his tether. The rats of the mines have finished Major Serafe. We must close in on our prey, and to-morrow's sun must see him on the road that leads to the distant gallows."

The two ferrets were quitting the shanty when a man with a lamp in his hand rushed out of the old gambling-den, and, followed by twenty more, ran toward the bulletin board, and held up the light to read the paper posted there.

"By Jove, this is Don Ramon's proclamation!" cried he. "Who said that Chita Con was here and put up a notice?"

Then the reader, tall and rough-looking, read the proclamation of the unmasked nabob, and at the close a hand came up and tearing the paper away exposed the work of Chita Con.

"Read that, Arizona!" said a dozen men.

Manuel and Mosco leaned forward, holding their breath and listening to the deep but penetrating voice of the reader of the camp.

"Ho! two kings in Centipede," laughed some one. "We don't want any. Down with both of them. We'll stick to the lost major. Off with the paper as we'd off with the head of the man who wrote it," and the hand that went up tore Chita Con's document from the board and the next moment it was where Captain Dagger's was—under the heels of the mob.

The cheer that followed the act echoed through the gold camp. It roused a man who had been sinking into the dark lethargy of death. He found his way to a door, and, staggering into the starlight, he cried at the top of his voice:

"Down with the two bosses of Centipede! To the burning lake with Don Ramon and Chita Con! I'm worth a thousand dead men—I am Major Serafe!"

Then he fell forward on his face, and the mob, with a yell, rushed to where he lay.

CHAPTER XXXIX. IN THE SOFT GRIP.

It was true that the Woman with the Silken Hand had come back to Centipede.

While the adherents of Major Serafe were bending over his disfigured body, and cursing the man who had subjected him to such tortures, she stood among the young trees in the nabob's garden looking at the palace.

"Is he there?" she asked herself. "Have I come back with the final cards in my hand to find him beyond my reach! We are all here now—Jaguar Juan, Mosco, Manuel. ay, all of us! No, Gabriel is absent; but circumstances which he cannot control, keep him away."

She laughed as she uttered the words, for they carried her thoughts back to the man she had left on the blanket in the little valley where old Gabriel had made his last crawl. He would not come to balk her, that was certain; and now, all she had to do was to enter the house before her and finish forever the game she had been playing.

She heard the voices of the major's friends, and started. They had picked up the little man and were carrying him to his own cabin. He was unconscious, if not dead, and the toughs of Centipede were swearing vengeance at every step.

Perdita started toward the house at last.

She laid her hand on the knob, hesitated for a moment, and then pushed open the door.

Once more she stood beneath the roof of the bandit-nabob, and her hands shut madly when she thought that he was near and almost in their grip.

Don Ramon, who had come back, after posting the proclamation on the bulletin board, sat at his desk, but not with a pen in his hand.

He had discarded the mask of Captain Dagger, and was the Nabob of Centipede again!

"They may not see the document till morning," said he. "Then we will meet face to face and have it out. To-morrow will determine who is master here. By Heaven, I'd like to know whether Jaguar Juan and his Indian are back. They have followed me with the pertinacity of twin bloodhounds; they watched me for months here, and I never tried to balk 'em. I thought myself powerful enough to check them, at any time, and waited for them to make a move. When I sent Felipe back here to find and rescue Dirrell, the American, I did it to baffle Chita and the major, for I felt able to entrap Dirrell when I once more became Don Ramon. Now he is in this house, and Juanita is his nurse. I see through the play; it is Manuel's trick. The big miner has been at this work some time. Dirrell came to Centipede at his command. It is a dash for the millions of Don Ramon."

He fell back in his chair and did not speak again. Suddenly he sprung up and started across the floor.

"I'll find Juanita and reveal all," said he, firmly. "I'll show her the face of Captain Dagger, though, if Dirrell has told her anything, she may know the secret ere this."

He was at the door when a footstep fell upon his ears, and the next moment he faced a person whose appearance seemed to rivet him to the floor.

Perdita stood before him! There was no mistaking the stately figure of the Woman of the Silken Hand. He would have recognized her if the light had not streamed over her form, revealing it from head to foot, and showing the soft but deadly hands, as white as the snow on the highest peaks that looked down on the gold camp.

She had come almost without noise, but she was there! She stood near the door, looking at him as if her eyes would pierce him through, now with a smile on her lip and now with none at all.

Don Ramon fell back from the door, and then went toward her.

"So you've come with your infernal hands?" said he. "Well, I'm glad to be thus honored in my own house."

He seemed to tower above her as he stood within a few feet of her well-posed figure, and all at once, he stepped forward and raised his hand till it covered the door through which she had just come.

"The palace is a death-trap," he remarked. "I don't want your blood. Go and live out your life elsewhere."

The eyes before him suddenly glittered.

"I depart with the last throw," was the quick response. "I am the avenger of blood—the avenger of the blood of Gomez."

"Yes, you are Perdita, the Woman of the Silken Hand. I am Don Ramon, the nabob. There are two bands of wolves in Centipede. Why don't you stand back and see us fight it out? To-morrow will settle the question of supremacy. If I win, come back, and take my throat in your grip if you can. If I fail, somebody will have avenged Gomez without any risk on your part. Oh, you don't want it that way, eh?"

"You know I do not, Don Ramon." She took a step nearer. "You call this house a trap of death. I know its secrets. I have been here before. It is a death palace. He died here; in this room, was it not? He felt at his throat your merciless hands, and from here he went to the cemetery on the mountain, clad in your gaudy clothes! A trap of death? You are right. It shall keep its name till it crumbles."

The nabob looked again at the hands that hung at the speaker's sides. They contained no weapon that he could see, yet they seemed to have assumed since she began to speak a new power and a new terror which kept his gaze transfixed upon them.

He was about to speak—to utter a sentence of defiance, and one which he thought would bring about a crisis, when he heard a sound that bound his tongue.

A door had opened and shut.

"Sit down!" commanded Perdita, pointing to the chair at the desk. "Don Ramon, you are to die in your own palace. The hand you sent across the desert with the air filled with vultures is at last at your life, and all the power you once had here is gone. You are no stronger than the cur that yelps through the streets of Centipede. I am at the end of my trail. The hand you've laughed at—the one from which Felipe recently saved you, is to leave this house with a dead man behind it."

He felt like bursting into a derisive laugh. He did not move toward the chair.

The room beyond, the one where he had heard the noise, was dark, and all at once he heard some one fall over a chair, and the next instant a mad cath came to his ears and Perdita's.

Both looked at the door and it opened.

"I thought I would find it after a while," exclaimed the person who presented himself in the light, much to the astonishment of the nabob and his huntress. "I nearly broke my neck—Heavens!" and he fell back, staring at the scene before him.

The new-comer was a tall man with the qualities of the mining desperado everywhere visible. Don Ramon knew him at once.

"Do you know that woman, Felix?" he asked.

Felix, the big miner, and one whom he knew he could trust, leaned forward.

"She's pretty, like a tigress is," said he, showing his teeth. "I got a glimpse of a woman like her in camp six months ago. Shall I speak before her, captain?"

"Speak!" ordered Don Ramon, wondering why the sudden confrontation had not startled Felix more. "What is up?"

"They've torn down your notice; they've found Major Serafe nearly dead in camp, and they'll be here in a jiffy. I can rouse our men, for we've got fifty-six all told who'll stand by us to the last. What is to be done?"

Don Ramon saw the necessity of prompt action, but the Woman with the Silken Hand was in his way, and she must be disposed of first.

He sent a swift and menacing glance from Felix to the woman. The miner seemed to collect his powers.

"Say the word," said his eyes, "and I'll launch myself upon the intruder. What you do must be done at once; no time to lose!"

Perdita appeared to read the man's very thoughts, for she suddenly flung herself forward and got between Don Ramon and his desk.

He felt like bursting into a derisive laugh.

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"Launch your tiger at me and see what will happen," she cried, looking a moment at Felix, whose intention was not to be mistaken. "I am ready to meet both you and your wolf. Is he better than Felipe was?"

"Shall I?" asked Felix, opening and shutting his dark hands. "It seems to me that I've heard of her before. We can't waste time with this woman here. Why, the men of the other side are getting ready to avenge Major Serafe, for he says you sent him to rat-hell and left him bound to a chair in the dungeon."

Don Ramon threw up his hand.

"At her, Felix!" he cried, sharply, stepping back at the same moment. "Rid me of the Woman with the Soft Hand."

Felix went forward with a bound. If there had been a tiger in his path he would have made the same sort of leap, though his hands might not have been raised quite so high.

Perdita fell back as the big man dashed at her. At the same time there dashed into view, in the light of the lamp swinging overhead, a blade that glittered in Felix's face.

Don Ramon sprung across the room and shut the door. There should be no witness and no rescue.

A cry burst from the lips of the woman as she met the leap. Felix made a grab for her wrist, but it was jerked away, and the next second Perdita stood on the other side of the room, looking at the baffled tough, with eyes filled with victory.

Felix stood alone, panting like a dog, but all could see that he had not given up the battle.

"She has hunted me for years," declared Don Ramon, glancing at his man while he spoke. "She wants to throw to the winds the millions we have won. She seeks the life of the young lady upstairs."

"Juanita's life?" echoed Felix.

"Juanita's!"

The miner turned toward Perdita; his veins swelled again almost bursting.

"It is an infamous lie!" retorted the Woman with the Silken Hand. "I touched the young girl once, but I would not harm her for the whole world, because she is not that villain's child! Juanita is a waif of the great desert—the beautiful spoil of a bandit raid when a ranch went up in flames, and when the father died by the hand of Don Ramon. I want no blood but that which courses through the heart of the bandit-millionaire of Arizona. I came here for it and no hand, not even yours, Felix, shall baffle me!"

Perdita came forward, with the light of madness in the flashing eyes. Her white hand held up the knife, and Felix seemed to shrink away; his courage was beginning to ooze out at his finger-ends.

"I've sold my soul to Satan for the throat of that man," she went on, "so stand back, cat, and let me at him!"

There was something so terrible in the aspect of the Woman with the Silken Hand that Felix at once fell back and left Don Ramon standing before her, like a charmed bird in the presence of its destroyer.

Don Ramon caught her hands in both of his, but the grip was broken; he tried to recoup, but she baffled him, and for the second time in his career he felt the silken hands under his chin.

As Perdita, with the power of frenzy, bore him back, he sent a wild cry for help toward the silent and white-faced looker-on.

"Felix! Felix! for God's sake—"

The hands seemed to meet in his throat, and Perdita's mad eyes were blazing like two stars before his face, when the door he had shut flew wide, and a man rushed in.

"Jaguar Juan," thought Don Ramon; "but, thank Heaven even for him! Anything to escape the death-grip of this desert avenger."

The bulging eyes of the bandit-nabob looked

CHAPTER XL.

THE LAST CLUTCH.

THE sudden appearance of the detective of Centipede seemed to throw some life into Felix, for, as Jaguar Juan sprung toward Perdita and her victim, he bolted from the house and vanished!

Juan had barely obtained a glimpse of Felix. He saw but the struggle going on between the Woman with the Silken Hand and Don Ramon and rushing forward grasped the soft hands and tried to break their terrible grip.

The bulging eyes of the bandit-nabob looked

thanks the lips could not speak, and the strength of the detective at last tore her from her prey.

Perdita fell back with a gasp of rage. She saw Don Ramon in the hands of the man she had sworn to baffle; she felt that the Yellow Shadower had triumphed at last, and that her game of vengeance had been balked!

"Give him to me!" she appealingly cried, stretching forth her hands, at sight of which the nabob drew back and shuddered. "He belongs to these hands. I have placed on the books of heaven an oath to strangle him, and you, Jaguar Juan, have no right to come between. Let me face him alone for five minutes—give the bandit-nabob and assassin to me for that time, and I will let you take him over the border to justice. What do the old proclamations say? 'Dead or alive.' You and your Indian pard have sworn to find the man who years ago was the pest of the ranches, and you have found him. But, he belongs to me first, I say. He belongs to the woman he sent, Mazeppa-like, across the desert with old Gabriel and a flock of vultures near at hand. He is the prey of Perdita, the widow of Don Gomez, his own brother, who sleeps on the mountain in his clothes; and yet, you hold him back from me! Let me have him for five minutes—no more!"

Jaguar Juan looked at the pleading woman, and then glanced at Don Ramon.

"Do with me what you will, as your prisoner, but keep me from the hands of that insane creature!" cried the nabob.

Then came the report of a revolver. A pane of glass shattered and the bullet whizzed past the detective's head.

"Down with the king of Centipede!" came in at the broken window.

Don Ramon raised himself and looked at Juan.

"You know what that means," said Perdita. "The friends of Major Serafe have opened the battle. They are going to depose the man in your grip. Shall he escape us both?"

"He will not escape me!" answered the detective, decisively.

"You can't fight the mutineers of Centipede," contemptuously rejoined the avenger. "Why, your red ally even has deserted you and—"

"Mosco is here!" said a voice, and the half-naked figure of the Maricopa appeared on the scene. "The men of Centipede who want the man who sent Major Serafe to the rats have surrounded the palace. They have just sworn over the dead body of the major to hang Don Ramon and to turn on Chita Con."

The Indian was followed by a series of yells, which left no doubt of the truth of his words, and Juan looked toward the window. He saw a number of faces there; he looked into the glaring eyes of the adherents of the little major, now no more, and realized the full force of Perdita's boast that he could not successfully resist the bronzed mob on the outside.

"Quick, or all is lost!" continued the Indian. "Let the huntress end her trail before the men of the camp. They won't touch her, nor will they injure Juanita. They want the blood of the two kings of Centipede—Don Ramon and Chita Con. To the mine!"

The last three words were whispered, and the Indian, clutching the detective's arm, almost dragged both he and his prisoner across the room.

"He sha'n't escape me!" cried Perdita, rushing after them, but the Maricopa turned on her with the mad cry of an animal, and threw her across the carpet and almost against the window.

"Now," said the red-skin. "They are at the doors."

It was quick work for the three men to reach the trap leading to the dark corridors under the palace. Mosco held it up while Jaguar Juan and Don Ramon descended, and when they had disappeared, he vanished himself and bolted the lid of the trap on the under side.

As for the Woman with the Silken Hand, she was not slow to recover from the Indian's violence, but when she reached the door, it was immovable.

She tugged at the trap until her veins stood out almost to bursting, then, realizing that the man she had hunted so long had fallen into the clutches of one equally as indefatigable, she fell back with a groan of agony.

All at once there sounded a noise which she knew only too well. The mob of Centipede had entered the house; Major Serafe's avengers were swarming in at every door, and she stood in the middle of the room strangely hesitating between flight and new allies.

"They might give me a chance," said Perdita. "The men of Centipede might be more merciful than Jaguar Juan. If I tell them where he is, I might find his throat after all."

She looked at the closed trap and then faced the six men who rushed into the room, but who fell back at sight of her.

"The woman who has been trailing him!" said one of the six.

"I am Perdita," replied the woman of the desert, stepping forward.

She would have said more if there had not been another rush forward, and before she could speak she was borne aside and the men were gone.

Then she heard a scream and turned to find herself face to face with Juanita!

"I don't want your blood," cried Perdita, advancing upon the girl who stood before her with a face as white as the night robes that hid her graceful figure. "If you were of his blood I'd sink my hands into your throat and laugh to see your pretty eyes leap from your head. You haven't a drop of Don Ramon's blood in your veins. If you want to know who you are, ask Juan. Oh, I wish you were of the nabob's race! I've quite lost him, in the end, and I'd like to try my hands—"

There was another scream, and a fall, and the beauty of Centipede lay in a swoon at Perdita's feet.

The huntress avenger leaned forward and looked for a moment into the face on the carpet, and then sprang up as a puff of smoke dashed into her face.

The palace was on fire!

"They'll burn the nest, anyhow!" cried Perdita, bursting into a bitter laugh. "Ought I to save the child he was making his heir all these years of money-getting? She'd never thank me for it; she's

too proud. No, let the flames end her career with the nabob's nest."

She drew back and looked once more at Juanita; then, as a cloud of smoke rolled into the room, she sprang away and left the girl to her fate!

A week has passed. There are ashes where once stood the proud palace of the Arizona Nabob—the man with two lives and names. A horse carrying a burden, horrible enough to make the most courageous man shudder, is moving over a rough trail and trying by rubbing against the rocks he encounters to rid himself of his rider.

Now and then a troop of vultures soar downward and almost touch the horse, and now rise again only to repeat the swoop after a brief interval.

On the breast of the dead man lashed to the animal is a placard whose inscription, almost obliterated by rock and tree, reads:

"KING CHITA. DEPOSED AT CENTIPEDE.

NO KINGS FOR US!"

The horse passes on and disappears, and the inscription tells how the mutineers caught the overseer, how they broke the power of the fifty-six, how they tried Chita Con by the Tribunal, which was Major Serafe's pet, and how they sentenced him to the doom we have just indicated.

After the trial the remnant of the fifty-six joined the new masters and the games were going on as before, while Dirrell and Manuel had been allowed to live because the young American, rushing into the burning palace, rescued, just in time, the inanimate form of Juanita, the nabob's heiress.

But, Jaguar Juan and his captive? What had become of them? And where was the Woman with the Silken Hand?

Down in the heart of a little valley, where the full moon throws long the shadows of a thousand cacti, three figures are stretched on the floor of a cabin in deep slumber.

At last one of the three awakens and looks at the men sleeping so near at hand.

For some time he looks and listens like a cat. His hands are tied on his back, and he has difficulty in moving a single muscle, but at last he wriggles toward the door. Not a sound he makes.

Half an hour passes, and the prisoner has unlatched the door with his feet; he has adroitly opened it, and the moonlight is streaming in.

His face lights up with sudden and deep-seated joy. In a short time he has rolled himself over the sill and is rolling over the ground outside.

On, on he rolls—further and further from the lonely cabin.

By and by one of the sleepers left behind starts up and feels for the captive. He is gone! In another instant two men are on their feet, looking everywhere for the fugitive. They rush from the cabin, and one—and that one an Indian—finds the trail.

Away they go after the prisoner, and at length both stop and bend over a human form lying in the shadow of some thorns.

The Indian pounces upon him and draws him into the moonlight, when the white man utters a cry of horror.

"Don Ramon won't get to confront the border courts," says he, and the Indian looks up and grins confirmation.

"She found him at last, Captain Juan," he answers. "Shall we hunt her down for it?"

The Yellow Shadower shakes his head.

"No, but we'll go back and see Dirrell marry the heiress of the mines, then I'll quit the trail forever, thanks to Perdita and her accursed fingers. He deserved what he got, and from her hands. He sent her over the desert because she loved his brother and not him; he killed that brother when he was Don Ramon, of Centipede, and tried to make us believe that he, and not Gomez, was the dead man; but the mutilated finger spoiled that game. Mosco, your prophecy did not come true. You said but one of us should reach the end of the trail alive. This is the end, and both of us live to go back. Come; let the vultures find Captain Dagger, alias Don Ramon, dead by the soft hands of the beauty of the old desert."

We are back once more in Centipede.

The old town is gay with lights, and the men of the mines have on their best garments. Manuel walks through the crowd with a smile on his face, for he has just solved a mystery by telling the pards that Dick Dirrell is his son, while Jaguar Juan has told how Juanita, who has just been made the young miner's bride, is the child of a noble house, plundered long ago by Don Ramon and Gomez; and the bronzed fellows are cheering at the top of their lusty voices.

While this is going on high above the camp, with her black eyes looking down upon its many lights, a woman sits firmly in the saddle, and listens to the cheers as they float up to her. She can almost hear the clink of glasses in the one resort of Centipede, and while she listens she bends over the pommel and laughs.

"Maybe it's all fright, after all," says she. "I won't interfere. My work is done. My hands shall hereafter be clasped in prayer for forgiveness. They have met in the last throat they will ever touch. I trust you won't take your misfortune to heart, Juan, and I wish for you and your Indian a peaceful old age."

She waves toward the gold camp one of her dead hands, and turns down the trail.

The moon shines on, lengthening the shadows of rock and tree until it disappears altogether; the new day comes at last; Dirrell and Juanita pass down the street, and the big pards of Centipede touch their broad-brimmed hats to the bride; but, there is no one on the mountain to look upon this scene!

The black horse and his rider have vanished, and by and by Perdita frightens a flock of vultures in a little valley. She reins in her steed and gazes at the loathsome object on the ground where the birds had been.

"It was a long hunt, but we found him!" she muttered, and kissing her right hand, which she has just addressed, she gives her horse the spur and is off like the wind—the huntress avenger no more!

THE END.

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